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SOUTH JERSEY

Lawsuits accuse three Camden diocese priests of clergy sex abuse

Jim Walsh Cherry Hill Courier-Post

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CAMDEN - A lawsuit accuses a former principal at two Catholic high schools of sexually abusing a child while serving at a Camden County parish.

The Rev. Kenneth L. Johnston was among three priests, all now dead, who were named in four suits filed Thursday against the Diocese of Camden.

The allegations of sexual misconduct were the first to be brought against Johnston, a former principal at Gloucester Catholic and St. James high schools. Johnston, also a pastor at three South Jersey parishes, was described as a "kindly, gentlemanly priest" in a June 2018 obituary.

Two lawsuits made accusations against the Rev. Eldridge Evans, a former teacher at St. James High. A third alleged wrongdoing by the Rev. Gerald P. Clements, who taught at Camden Catholic High School.

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The diocese has previously listed Evans and Clements among its clergy members credibly accused of sexual misconduct. Johnston's name does not appear on that list.

The lawsuits, filed Thursday in state court, allege the priests engaged in "unpermitted sexual contact" with boys during the 1970s.

Johnston is accused of improper conduct while serving at St. Anthony's Church in Atco in 1973-74. The accuser was 10 years old when the alleged abuse began, according to the lawsuit.

Evans is accused of abusing two students at St. James, a former high school in Carneys Point, Salem County. Lawsuits allege Evans engaged in sexual contact with one youth in 1971 and with another around 1975.

Clements was accused of misconduct at Camden Catholic, a Cherry Hill school, in 1977.

The three men claiming abuse by their high school teachers were all around 17 years old at the time of the alleged incidents, the lawsuits say.

A spokesman said the diocese "had not received any complaint or allegation concerning any of these three priests ... prior to or at the time specified in the respective lawsuits."

Johnston served as a priest in the South Jersey for 44 years, according to a June 2018 obituary in the diocesan newspaper, the Catholic Star Herald.

He led St. James High from 1984 to 1989, then oversaw Gloucester Catholic in Gloucester City until 1999. Johnston also was the pastor at St. Teresa in Runnemede, St. Mary in Williamstown and Incarnation in Mantua.

The Rev. Michael Romano, who as a teenager knew Johnston as his pastor, described him as "good to me and my family," according to the obituary.

"We got to know him, respect him and love him," said Romano, who described Johnston as a "kind, gentlemanly priest."

The lawsuits say the plaintiffs, as children, "had great admiration, trust, reverence, and respect" for the Catholic Church and its priests. The suits accuse the diocese of negligence, arguing it "knew or should have known" that the clergymen posed a threat to youngsters.

The suits were filed under a state law, enacted in December 2019, that created a two-year window for legal action previously barred by the statute of limitations for child sex-abuse allegations.

The suits also were filed after the diocese suspended its role in a program intended to compensate victims of clergy sex abuse.

The diocese last month said it could not afford to continue in the program due to "a precipitous decline in revenue resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic."

The diocese had awarded some \$7.5 million since the Independent Victim Compensation Program began in June 2019.

Michael Walsh, a spokesman for the diocese, said the man alleging abuse by Johnston filed a claim last year with the IVCP.

The program's administrators "subsequently determined that claim to be ineligible," Walsh said Friday.

The diocese's decision to suspend the program "has left these survivors with no other alternative than to file their claims," said Greg Gianforcaro, a lawyer representing the four men.

The Phillipsburg, Warren County, attorney contended the diocese' "self-serving" action had "re-traumatized" his clients.

"They were betrayed as children by the diocese when they were abused as kids by these priests, and now the diocese is betraying them again," the attorney claimed.

The Camden diocese serves some 475,000 Catholics in six South Jersey counties.

Jim Walsh is a free-range reporter who's been roaming around South Jersey for decades. His interests include crime, the courts, economic development and being first with breaking news. Reach him at jwalsh@gannettnj.com or look for him in traffic.

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