

FAITH

Lawsuit filed against Catholic diocese accuses priest of groping Avon Park woman during confession

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VENICE — An Avon Park woman has filed a \$15 million suit against the Diocese of Venice, alleging that the Rev. Nicholas McLoughlin, 77, formerly of Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church in Avon Park, attempted to grope and sexually assault her during confession in April 2018.

The Oct. 2 lawsuit filed in the 12th Judicial Circuit by Fort Lauderdale-based attorney Adam Horowitz on behalf of the woman — who was identified only as L.B. — alleges the Diocese and Bishop Frank J. Dewane should have known that McLoughlin was “unfit, dangerous, and/or a threat to the health, safety, care, health and well-being of their parishioners such as L.B.”

McLoughlin was placed on administrative leave by the Diocese in November, while the Diocese of St. Petersburg reviews a complaint of “inappropriate physical contact with a minor” lodged against him.

That allegation occurred while McLoughlin served as pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Temple Terrace from 1973 to 1982.

Last November, in a letter to parishioners, Dewane said that allegation had “a semblance of truth.”

Previously, McLoughlin was a co-defendant in two lawsuits involving his brother, Ed McLoughlin, a former priest who was accused of molesting teenage boys in the 1980s and 1990s.

A Diocese of Venice spokeswoman said via email Monday that the Diocese has not yet been served with the Avon Park lawsuit and McLoughlin is retired and no longer in the ministry.

The Avon Park complaint was looked into by Highlands County Sheriff's Office Investigator Anthony P. McGann but based upon lack of evidence or other witnesses, Assistant State Attorney Steve Houchins told him that the case would not be prosecuted.

According to McGann's report, L.B. moved from Homestead to Highlands County in February 2018, to be closer to her sister. After a web search, she determined Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church was the Catholic Church closest to where she lived.

She first went to Our Lady of Grace on March 25, 2018, Palm Sunday, when she introduced herself to a priest she later learned was McLoughlin, and told him where she was from. Reportedly he brusquely responded, "although he is a legend, I can't compete with that and if you think you came here for (name redacted) you've got the wrong place."

L.B. alleged that encounter left her shaken so much that she could not even pray as she sat in the pew.

She attended mass Easter Sunday but skipped confession.

On April 7, between 3:30 and 4 p.m., she went back to the church for confession. During confession, L.B. told McLoughlin she had a headache from falling off a horse.

He then got up to move towards her. L.B. said she thought he was going to make the sign of the cross in front of her forehead.

Instead, he allegedly put his thumb on her forehead and — with his other hand — grabbed her right breast.

She alleged he later groped both breasts and kissed her and when asked if he was preventing her from leaving, she answered yes.

The encounter reportedly left bruises and pain on her right breast, but she did not have photographs to document the claim.

According to McGann, L.B. said she did not file a report until after she "met two tourists at a Catholic Church in Lake Wales" who informed them about McLoughlin's past. She subsequently did a web search on him and called the sheriff on May 23.

On June 12, when McGann met with McLoughlin, he said the priest denied the allegations, said he did not perform confessions on Saturdays and said that there would typically be a large amount of people in the church prior to the 4 p.m. mass.

On July 22, McGann looked at the church calendar for April 2018, and saw that the calendar indicated McLoughlin was indeed hearing confessions at the time of the alleged incident.

The lawsuit claims that L.B. experienced “physical, psychological and emotional injuries, mental anguish and loss of enjoyment of life.”

The attorney, Adam Horowitz is seeking a jury trial.

Earle Kimel is a staff writer for the Sarasota Herald-Tribune.