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Diocese of Venice faces second suit alleging priest sexually assaulted female parishioners

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VENICE — The Diocese of Venice is facing its second \$15 million suit this month, alleging that the Rev. Nicholas McLoughlin, 77, formerly of Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church in Avon Park, sexually assaulted a female parishioner.

Both suits were filed in the 12th Judicial Circuit by Fort Lauderdale-based attorney Adam Horowitz.

The latest suit, filed on Oct. 25, is on behalf of a plaintiff identified only as J.H. and alleges that on or about September 2017, J.H. had attended Saturday afternoon mass with a female friend at Our Lady of Grace and wanted to seek a special blessing on her upcoming vows with the Franciscan Religious Order.

According to the suit, as the two women approached McLoughlin, “he suddenly grabbed J.H.’s head with one of his hands and forcefully kissed her on the lips and held her head against his lips so she couldn’t pull away.”

The suit closely mirrors but predates the incident from the Oct. 2 lawsuit filed by Horowitz, where, on April 7, 2018, the plaintiff, identified as L.B., was at the church for confession, when — after she told him she had a headache from falling off a horse — he allegedly put his thumb on her forehead and, with his other hand, grabbed her right breast.

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

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

Both suits allege 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."

Both lawsuits claim the plaintiffs experienced "physical, psychological and emotional injuries, mental anguish and loss of enjoyment of life."

In response to a query about the Oct. 2 lawsuit, a Diocese of Venice spokeswoman said McLoughlin is retired and no longer in the ministry.

A Diocese spokesman noted Monday that it was not served with the first suit until Oct. 22 and has not received notice of this latest complaint.

McLoughlin had been placed on administrative leave by the Diocese in November 2018 while the Diocese of St. Petersburg reviewed a complaint filed based on allegations of "inappropriate physical contact with a minor" when he was 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.

The Diocese of Venice, which was founded in June 1984, includes 10 counties: Charlotte, Collier, DeSoto, Glades, Hardy, Hendry, Highlands, Lee, Manatee and Sarasota.

Horowitz is seeking a jury trial in both cases and is asking for in excess of \$15 million in each.