

Third priest resigns amid allegations

By Teri Maddox

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The Rev. Robert Vonnahmen is the third priest in the Belleville Diocese to step down in two weeks because of allegations of sexual misconduct.

Vonnahmen resigned as pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Elizabethtown. Vonnahmen also was founder of Camp Ondessonk, a summer retreat for Catholic children, and served as its director for many years.

At a hastily called meeting at the church Thursday night, spokesmen for Bishop James Keleher, who was away on business at the Vatican, told parishioners that Vonnahmen was asked to leave Thursday afternoon.

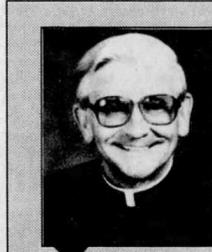
According to a written statement released to the News-Democrat on Friday, the alleged misconduct occurred more than 25 years ago and involved a minor.

Parishioners are outraged that Vonnahmen's good reputation is being muddied, said Nina Ferrell, a trustee at St. Joseph's and employee of the local post office.

"Our opinion is that (the allegation) is unfounded, and I speak for the whole church," she said. "We do not believe it. We do not think it is true. We know it isn't true. We're very upset and very angry about it."

Sister Michelle Emmerich, spokesman for Keleher, declined to discuss details of the allegation Friday. She referred to a church policy requiring that statements made by alleged victims or accused priests be kept confidential.

After all interviews and psychological assessments are completed, Emmerich said, the case will go to a review panel of lay people and priests. "(The misconduct) was reported in

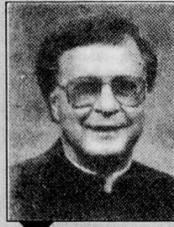


Rev. Jerome Ratermann

Former pastor: Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church, Belleville

RESIGNED: March 6, 1993

Reason: A 39-year-old Carlyle man alleged he was sexually abused by Ratermann more than 20 years ago. The diocese has been paying the man's truck payment and fines he owes.



Rev. James Calhoun

Former pastor: St. Boniface Catholic Church, Germantown

RESIGNED: March 18, 1993

Reason: A complaint recently was filed accusing Calhoun of sexual misconduct with a young adult male more than 10 years ago.

Scandal in the Diocese

Three priests resign

Rev. Robert Vonnahmen

Former pastor: St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Elizabethtown

RESIGNED: March 18, 1993

Reason: An accusation first was reported in February alleging sexual misconduct by Vonnahmen more than 25 years ago involving a minor.



February, and we have been gathering information and following our diocesan policy regarding action to be taken," she said.

Two other priests have resigned in

the past two weeks.

On March 6, the Rev. Jerome Ratermann resigned as pastor of Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Belleville because of allegations of

sexual misconduct in the 1970s.

On Thursday, the Rev. James Calhoun resigned as pastor of St. Boniface Catholic Church in Germantown because of an allegation of sex-

ual misconduct that the diocese said occurred more than 10 years ago. The alleged victim was a young adult.

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Resigns

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"We are a church that is dealing with a very painful situation," Emmerich said. Keleher is expected to return from his trip to Rome sometime this weekend.

Elizabethtown is a small, rural community on the Ohio River, which separates Illinois and Kentucky. St. Joseph's parish serves about 70 families.

Vonnahmen was pastor for 28 years except for a two-year reassignment in the mid-1980s when parishioners fought to get him back, Ferrell said.

On Friday, parishioners were unhappy about the allegations against their pastor, Ferrell said, but also the way the announcement was handled.

Apparently, diocesan officials called church leaders only a few hours before the 6 p.m. meeting Thursday and would not reveal the purpose or subject matter.

"I think it was a little short notice, and I think it was very unorthodox the way they did it, and we told them that at the meeting," Ferrell said.

Vonnahmen was asked to resign earlier that afternoon and had no chance for preparation or goodbyes, she added. "He was told not to talk to anyone, and he was told to leave the diocese. He wasn't even allowed to stay."

Ferrell also objected to the diocese giving written notices of the situation to newspapers instead of handling it more discreetly. Until proven guilty, she said, a person should not have his name dragged through the mud.

Ferrell believes this case will have a negative effect on Catholicism, particularly in Southern Illinois, where Protestant religions predominate.

"We're a small community down here, and it has really shaken us," she said. "We're the minority here already. It puts a bad light on our faith."

The Rev. Henry Engelhart, pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church in nearby Shawneetown, has been named administrator of the St. Joseph's parish for now.

Under the Catholic system, Emmerich said, each diocese is responsible for investigating allegations of misconduct by its priests and taking appropriate action.

No lawsuits have been filed against priests, she said, and no reports have been filed with police or the Department of Children and Family Services because none of the allegations involve victims who still are children.

As with Ratermann and Calhoun, officials are not releasing Vonnahmen's whereabouts.

"They are away from the diocese and are not anywhere where they would have contact with children or teenagers," Emmerich said.