

# ***4 PRIESTS LINKED TO SEX MISDEEDS***

The New York Times  
April 2, 1993

In the last four weeks, four priests in one small Roman Catholic diocese in southern Illinois have been removed as pastors after accusations of sexual misconduct that stretch back to the 1960's.

The allegations involve separate incidents in four separate communities. But they have stunned Catholics in the Belleville Diocese, which reaches across southern Illinois from the Mississippi River to the Ohio. With 119,000 Catholics, it is the smallest of Illinois's six dioceses, and it has just 140 priests.

In recent years the Catholic Church has been shaken and embarrassed by a wave of lawsuits accusing priests of sexual misconduct. But seldom has the issue hit a diocese so hard and so quickly as in Belleville. This year the diocese established a board of three priests and five lay people to deal with allegations of sexual misconduct. Then, in February, The Belleville News-Democrat published several articles about allegations of sexual abuse against unidentified priests.

## **4 Depart in Quick Succession**

On March 6, at a parish meeting, it was announced that the Rev. Jerome Ratermann, 61, had resigned as pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church in Belleville over allegations of sexual misconduct with minors

dating to his tenure as principal of a Catholic high school in Breese in the 1960's.

Soon afterward, the Rev. James Calhoun, 66, departed as pastor of St. Boniface Church in Germantown, and the Rev. Robert Vonnahmen, 62, was asked to resign as pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Elizabethtown.

Late Tuesday afternoon, word quickly spread that a fourth priest, the Rev. David Crook, 41, was being removed as pastor of St. George Church in New Baden pending an investigation of an allegation of sexual misconduct with a teen-ager in the last 10 years.

The priests have been secluded in undisclosed locations outside the diocese and cannot be reached by reporters for comment. Parish officials say the priests willingly cooperated with the actions. Bishop James Keleher could not be reached for comment.

Reactions in the close-knit Catholic community vary from disbelief to bewilderment to anger. The anger is often aimed at the accusers, who have not been identified publicly by the diocese or the press, at the press.

"It does seem to fit the season," said a woman on her way to a recent Sunday Mass at Blessed Sacrament, refusing to give her name. "The priests are being crucified and this is Lent."