

## Church Whistle-Blowers Join Forces on Abuse

By Laurie Goodstein

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5 MIN READ

They call themselves Catholic Whistleblowers, a newly formed cadre of priests and nuns who say the Roman Catholic Church is still protecting sexual predators.

Although they know they could face repercussions, they have banded together to push the new pope to clean house and the American bishops to enforce the zero-tolerance policies they adopted more than a decade ago.

The group began organizing quietly nine months ago without the knowledge of their superiors or their peers, and plan to make their campaign public this week. Most in the steering group of 12 have blown the whistle on abusers in the past, and three are canon lawyers who once handled abuse cases on the church's behalf. Four say they were sexually abused as children.

Their aim, they say, is to support both victims and fellow whistle-blowers, and identify shortcomings in church policies. They hope to help not just minors, but also adults who fall prey to clergy who exploit their power for sex. They say that their motivation is to make the church better and safer, and to show the world that there are good priests and nuns in the church.

"We've dedicated our lives to the church," the Rev. John Bambrick, a priest in the Diocese of Trenton, said at a meeting of the group last week in New York. "Having sex offenders in ministry is damaging to our ministry."

The group has sent a letter to Pope Francis asking him to take several significant steps to heal victims and restore the church's credibility: revoke all oaths of secrecy, open the files on abuse cases, remove from office any bishops who obstructed justice and create an international forum for dialogue between survivors and church leaders.

The Catholic Church in the United States put in place a zero-tolerance policy and a host of prevention programs after the abuse scandal peaked in 2002. Each year the bishops commission an audit of abuse cases, and this year's survey, released May 9, found the fewest allegations and victims since the audits began in 2004.



But the whistle-blowers' group of abusive clergy (who now number in the hundreds) still have access to children. They point to the revelation of a priest's sexual abuse and his order from working with children on weekend youth retreats.



zero-tolerance policies, and (credible) still have access to a offender restricted by a court order from children and going on

Several of the whistle-blowers have been vocal about that priest, the Rev. Michael Fugee. Along with some New Jersey politicians, they have called for the resignation of the archbishop of Newark, John J. Myers. They fault Archbishop Myers not only for failing to restrict Father Fugee, but also for appointing him to help direct the education of priests in the archdiocese.

Archbishop Myers's spokesman said the archbishop was unaware of the priest's activities, and is cooperating with an investigation by the Bergen County prosecutor. Father Fugee left the ministry, and on Monday was arrested on charges that he violated a judicial order by having contact with minors. The bishop of Trenton, David M. O'Connell, removed another priest and two youth ministers from the parish in Trenton where Father Fugee worked with youth.

The Newark case, as well as the release of personnel records on priests by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and convictions of church officials in Philadelphia and Kansas City, convinced the whistle-blowers' group that they have work to do despite the optimistic picture in the bishops' audits. They do not consider the bishops' audits credible because they are based on self-reporting.

The group discussed the latest scandal in Newark at a meeting last week in Manhattan. At that meeting, Sister Sally Butler traveled from Brooklyn; Sister Maureen Paul Turlish from Delaware; the Rev. Ronald Lemmert from Peekskill, N.Y.; and Father Bambrick, Msgr. Kenneth E. Lasch and Robert Hoatson, a former priest, came from New Jersey. The Rev. James Connell joined in by speakerphone from Sheboygan, Wis. (The Rev. Thomas P. Doyle — perhaps the church's most famed whistle-blower — recently joined the group but could not attend.) They had been conducting their weekly meetings by conference calls, and it was only the second time most of them had met face to face.

Each member has a history of standing up publicly on behalf of abuse victims, but until last year most of them did not know of one another. A Catholic laywoman, Anne Barrett Doyle, who lives in Boston, suggested they should meet. She is the co-director of BishopAccountability.org, a Web site and advocacy group that is building a database of documents on clergy abuse cases, and a co-worker, Suzy Nauman, had been keeping a running list of priests and nuns who had helped expose predators or had spoken out.

Last year Ms. Doyle spoke with Father Lemmert about the backlash he experienced after exposing a case in New York, and he later told her that talking about his experiences was "very therapeutic." The group was initially conceived more as a confidential support group for the whistle-blowers themselves.

"I joined the group," said Father Lemmert, "because I had been badly ostracized because I blew the whistle. There was no support out there, and this group has been a lifeline."



Several members of the group, which includes priests and nuns, met in Manhattan last week. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Until last week, he intended to keep his involvement in the group under wraps for fear of repercussions. But at the meeting Father Lemmert announced, "I just decided to stand up and be counted."

The group has evolved to take on a more policy-oriented role, drafting the letter to the new pope with six suggestions for action. They sent the letter in late April to the pope and several Vatican officials, but have not received any response yet.

They expressed varying degrees of optimism about whether Pope Francis will follow through on the goal first articulated by Pope John Paul II that there is no room for sexual abusers in the priesthood. They noted that Pope Francis recently said that all human beings must be protected with “clarity and courage” — especially children, “who are the most vulnerable.”

Monsignor Lasch said to the group, “The pope has asked us to speak with clarity and courage, and that’s what we’ve done with him.” Mr. Hoatson added, “It’s time that clarity and courage are rewarded rather than harassed and dismissed.”

Mr. Hoatson and Monsignor Lasch founded Road to Recovery, a group that assists abuse victims, but Mr. Hoatson left the priesthood in 2011 after a series of run-ins with Archbishop Myers. He said he has found the recent spotlight trained on the Newark archbishop very encouraging.

The whistle-blowers’ group plans to hold its first news conference this week in New York, and some members are bracing for the reaction. They said they know priests who spoke up and were removed from their parishes, hustled into retirement or declared “unstable” and sent to treatment centers for clergy with substance-abuse problems or sexual addictions.

As for what they hope to accomplish, the whistle-blowers had very different answers.

“That all the children in our church would be safe,” said Father Bambrick.

“That the people who covered up would go to jail,” said Sister Butler.

“That’s not what I’m in this for,” said Monsignor Lasch. “I’m in this for justice and mercy and truth and compassion.”

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