

Worcester priest denies child abuse allegations

By Gerard F. Russell
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

WORCESTER — An 82-year-old retired priest, the latest cleric in the Worcester Roman Catholic Diocese to be accused of sexually assaulting a child, yesterday denied the allegations contained in a civil lawsuit filed in Worcester Superior Court.

The diocese, which has been stung by several allegations in recent weeks of sexual misconduct by priests dating to the 1970s, also denies any wrongdoing in the case of Rev. Justin Steponaitis and said it will challenge the lawsuit.

Michael A. Lavigne of Athol alleges in the complaint filed Monday that Father Steponaitis molested him and "numerous young parish children" while the priest was assigned to St. Francis of Assisi Church in Athol from 1971 to 1976.

Lavigne's lawyer, Sherrill P. Cline, said that her client, then an

altar boy, was assaulted "at least six times" and that the incidents involved "fondling and oral sex."

"I never did it," Father Steponaitis said yesterday from his home in Putnam, Conn. Father Steponaitis, who retired in 1987, referred all questions to Bishop Timothy J. Harrington's office.

Msgr. Edmond T. Tinsley, a spokesman for the Worcester bishop, denied any wrongdoing by Father Steponaitis or the diocese. "Father Steponaitis denies the charge categorically," Msgr. Tinsley said, adding that the diocese has no knowledge of other alleged victims or of any misconduct by Father Steponaitis.

James Reardon, a lawyer who represents the diocese, said yesterday that the diocese "will seek a trial," adding: "I think it is a flagrant abuse of the process to make a bad situation worse by suggesting others, and [Cline] cannot give us the names of the others."