

Catholic priest faces sentencing for sexual abuse

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JUSTICE REPORTER

Father Bernard Cloutier will stand alone in a Sudbury courtroom today to be sentenced for his sexual abuse three decades ago of a group of altar boys who had idolized him.

Missing from the prisoner's dock, but present in spirit, will be Bishop Gerard Dionne - named as a culprit in a rare judicial finding that the Roman Catholic Church intervened to forestall criminal charges being laid against Father Cloutier in 1983.

Coming on the heels of a recent scandal over child pornography charges laid against Nova Scotia Bishop Raymond Lahey, the cases raise new questions about the church's response to sexual misconduct within the clergy.

Lawyer Susan Vella - an authority on cases involving sexual abuse within religious institutions - said that the Cloutier case is a rare instance where evidence indicates a high-level attempt by the church to subvert a police investigation.

"I think it's safe to say that it's not a common occurrence for these kind of allegations to come to light, and then be proven," she said.

In 2007, the five complainants came forward one by one to allege that Father Cloutier had groomed them during weekend drinking parties and out-of-town trips three decades earlier, and then sexually assaulted them.

In testimony earlier this year at Father Cloutier's trial, court heard that the priest had an excellent stereo system and often supplied cigarettes and liquor to boys who visited the rectory. One man said that Father Cloutier had been like a big brother: "I trusted him. I thought he was God. He was a best friend."

At the core of Crown counsel Diana Fuller's case was an emotional meeting held in 1983 at the home of one of the altar boys, attended by two Sudbury Regional Police investigators. Early in the meeting, Bishop Dionne and Father Cloutier arrived uninvited.

The lead investigator in the case - retired Detective Fern Kingsley - recalled in an interview that the arrival of the clergymen had no real effect on the meeting.

"By the time that the priest and bishop reached the house, the boys had recanted," Mr. Kingsley said. "They said that nothing had happened. So, I couldn't go anywhere with it. It's just the way things happen sometimes."

However, Mr. Justice Paul Kane of the Ontario Superior Court was skeptical about Mr. Kingsley's version of events. He said that he preferred the testimony of the altar boys and their parents, who insisted that Bishop Dionne, 90, had angrily taken over the meeting. The bishop took the boys upstairs individually to be questioned in private, they said, while the officers meekly waited in the dining room.

The altar boys and their parents also stated that Bishop Dionne flatly informed them after conducting the interviews that Father Cloutier had done nothing wrong - but would nonetheless be sent away for a few months to receive therapy.

Soon after, Father Cloutier was quietly moved to another diocese. "The defendant and bishop used their superior religious positions over devout parents and a religious policeman to halt and neutralize a Crown investigation," Judge Kane concluded. "If the boys recanted, as per Mr. Kingsley's version, why send the defendant for treatment?"

When the altar boys re-emerged in 2007 with their accusations about the long-ago events, Father Cloutier was charged with numerous counts of gross indecency, indecent assault and sexual assault between 1970 and 1983.