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EDITOR'S PICK

Suit Alleges Sexual Abuse at Point Retreat

By Bill Barlow

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A New York state woman filed a lawsuit alleging she endured abuse by clergy members while staying at the Marianist Center, on Yale Road, in Cape May Point.

Bill Barlow

CAPE MAY POINT – For over 50 years, the Marianist Family Retreat Center, on the corner of Yale and Cape avenues, in Cape May Point, has been the site of contemplation, celebration and prayer for the faithful.

One woman alleges that in summer 1974, it was a site of horror and violation that still hurts decades later.

At the time, she was 14 years old and a volunteer camp counselor, according to a complaint filed in Superior Court Jan. 6. Identified in the court documents as Jane Doe RP, she filed a suit against the center and the Marianist Province of the United States, alleging that she faced repeated sexual abuse from two clergy members.

One, the Rev. John Sheehan, was included in a list of Society of Mary members found to have sexually abused a minor. The other, brother Albert Koch, does not appear to be on any such list and appears to have been active at the center into 2020.

“Sheehan, I believe, has passed away. Al Koch, late last year, was removed from the retreat,” said Patrick Noaker, an attorney representing Jane Doe.

Noaker is an attorney in Minneapolis. The accuser lives in New York state, where she grew up. The suit states that she decided to remain anonymous to avoid further harm. She is married, with grown children.

“This was a long time coming,” Noaker said.

There is no indication that criminal charges were ever filed against either man. A search of news articles and databases outlining clergy abuse did not show other accusations of abuse at the center.

The civil suit is requesting a jury trial, in Cape May County. It does not list a number for the damages requested. That will be up to the jury, Noaker said.

The 2019 New Jersey Child Victims Act cleared the way for the suit, according to Noaker. It opened a two-year window for people to file civil claims asserting childhood abuse, even if it took place decades earlier. According to published accounts, 46 new cases were filed within the first minute of the act taking effect, with hundreds more on the way.

The civil suit filed against the retreat center alleges that the Marianist organization knew, or should have known, the risk of child sexual abuse, and had a duty to protect Doe while caring for her.

Anthony Fucci, director, Marianist Family Retreat Center, said Jan. 8 that the center had not received any lawsuit. He directed questions to the national organization and provided an email address. There was no immediate response to a request for comment.

The center recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. The order purchased the sprawling building close to the beach, in 1962, for the use of its members and began offering retreats in 1970, according to published accounts. It remains in active use.

A retreat was scheduled for college-age students and high school seniors, in January, with plans for youth and family retreats over the summer, with a caveat that schedules could change due to the uncertainties surrounding Covid.

“Rest assured, should you wish to sign up for a program, we are taking precautions and have policies in place to ensure the health and safety of all our guests,” reads a statement on the schedule.

The lawsuit names both the center and one of two national organizations, known as the Marianist Province of the United States. The Diocese of Camden was not named as a plaintiff in the suit, but it is mentioned, with the assertion that the diocese had a duty in its supervision and retention of Sheehan.

“The Diocese of Camden also had the duty to use reasonable care to protect the minor plaintiff from foreseeable harm. The Diocese of Camden breached these duties, and plaintiff was injured, as a result. The Diocese of Camden has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, in the United States Bankruptcy Court, for the District of New Jersey,” the complaint reads. “Accordingly, the Diocese of Camden is not a named defendant and will not be further discussed in the current matter because to do so would violate the automatic stay.”

The Roman Catholic Society of Mary traces its roots to a priest who survived the French Revolution.

The Marianists describe themselves as a “big, joyful, prayerful, diverse community” that carries the mission of Mary, Jesus' mother, to the world.

“We work in education, social justice and pastoral ministry, with a focus on building strong communities of faith and service,” reads a description on the society’s website.

In March 2020, the Rev. Oscar Vasquez announced the publication of a list of members who have been found to have sexually abused a minor. The list includes Sheehan, who was ordained in 1961. He worked at high schools in New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland, as well as the center, in Cape May Point.

“For decades, despicable and evil acts of abuse committed by clergy and vowed religious of the Catholic Church dwelled in the shadows. Hidden and ignored by church members and leaders, these abhorrent sins festered, stifling the light of our church,” Vasquez wrote.

“I offer my most heartfelt apology for the transgressions committed by Marianist priests and brothers,” he continued. “We pray that those in need of healing will find peace and that this evil will never again darken the light of God’s church.”

The Diocese of Camden posted a list of priests credibly accused of the sexual abuse of minors. Neither Sheehan nor Koch appear on the list, although several priests assigned in Cape May County have been listed. There appears to be no mention of the retreat center.

The suit presents few details of what allegedly happened in Cape May Point, in summer 1974, but includes extensive details of allegations of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy, citing some material that dates to medieval times.

Accusations of abuse by clergy have dogged the church for years, with a major turning point coming in the form of investigative reports from the Boston Globe, starting in early 2002. Allegations include that church officials knew of the abuse and reassigned clergy members to better cover it.

Noaker points to Sheehan in this instance, stating that he was moved between several schools in a short time. Koch, on the other hand, spent decades at the Cape May Point retreat. A social media post, in 2017, mentions him playing harmonica at an event, and a later posting seems to indicate he was participating in Zoom meetings at the center last year.

“Defendants breached their duties by recruiting, hiring, and maintaining father John Sheehan and brother Albert Koch in a position of authority over children,” the suit alleges.

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