



## Grand jury account of Pittsburgh-area priest is released



PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

Got a news tip? 412-263-1601

localnews@post-gazette.com 

DEC 17, 2019

7:56 PM

A newly released portion of a 2018 grand jury report indicates that the Roman Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh received an allegation of sexual abuse against a priest in the mid-1990s and that the priest admitted his sexual attraction to teenagers.

But he remained in ministry more than two decades longer because, until 2018, diocesan officials felt they didn't have enough evidence to remove him entirely from ministry.

The new information comes in what may be the last piece of redacted information to be unsealed from the landmark 2018 statewide grand jury report into sexual abuse in the Catholic



MENU



The priest, the Rev. Richard Lelonis, died in October at age 74. He spent 48 years in the priesthood, but much of the latter half of that career was spent in restricted ministry, away from parish work but still wearing the collar as a priest in good standing, after the 1995 allegation.

Father Lelonis was one of a small number of priests who challenged aspects of the grand jury report into sexual abuse by priests in six Roman Catholic dioceses, including Pittsburgh. Most of that group wanted their names redacted entirely from the grand jury's report, a move the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ultimately agreed to.

But Father Lelonis only asked for the redaction of the portion of the report that dealt with his mental-health evaluation by Saint Luke Institute, a center that the diocese used to evaluate priests suspected of abuse. The court had kept Father Lelonis' name and other information sealed while it considered his appeal, and in November it agreed to keep the mental-health records sealed while unsealing his name and the account of his alleged deeds.

Father Lelonis had remained in administrative roles until 2018, after the release of the report, when the diocese received a second accusation against him and suspended him from ministry pending investigation. The diocese announced last month that it had concluded the allegations were credible.



---

In the mid-1990s, a man accused the priest of sexually abusing him when he was 11 or 12 in the early 1970s, when Father Lelonis was serving as parochial vicar at St. Luke Parish in Carnegie.

The man said the priest had befriended him and the family after the death of the boy's sister. He said Father Lelonis took him on overnight trips, shared alcohol and pornography with him and ultimately began performing oral sex on him. The man said the abuse occurred about once a month for years. When the teen finally tried to stop it and threatened to report him, he said the priest threatened to kill him.

The diocesan file noted that the man didn't want to go public but wanted to warn the diocese.

When questioned, Father Lelonis denied the allegation, though he admitted attraction to adolescents, couldn't say whether he provided the boy alcohol and acknowledged actions that would be "imprudent by today's standards."

The diocese, led then by Bishop Donald Wuerl, sent Father Lelonis to Saint Luke Institute for evaluation.

The institute recommended he return to ministry. The grand jury report quoted Bishop Wuerl as writing Father Lelonis to inform him of "sharing my joy at your return to full-time ministry." In subsequent years he was assigned to non-parish work, such as a

---



and couldn't conclude whether he was guilty of the accusation. The grand jury said Father Lelonis also provided information he obtained about the accuser's own alleged criminal history, hoping to undercut his credibility.

The diocese at that time referred the matter to the Allegheny County District Attorney's office, although the statute of limitations would likely have precluded prosecution.

He continued in restricted ministry and was not permitted to work with minors. That continued until the additional allegations surfaced in September 2018, when he was placed on leave entirely. He died Oct. 20.

In a news release, the diocese said its decision to place Father Lelonis in non-parish ministry was more strict than that recommended by Saint Luke Institute, which was to return him to pastoral work. It said it has continually worked to improve its responses to allegations as it learns more through experience and the insights of experts and victims.

"Decisions made by the diocese regarding a priest's suitability for ministry are made based on the evidence available and following processes that seek to protect both victims and respect the accused's right to defend themselves," it said.

COMMENTS DISABLED FOR THIS STORY

## MUST READ



LOCAL

**Us: Sisters are doin' it for themselves — and dessert lovers**

NEWS