

WORLD & NATION

Florida bishop admits abuse of minor; resigns

By Janet Shelton
Catholic News Service

PALM BEACH GARDENS, Fla. — Palm Beach Bishop Anthony J. O'Connell said his misconduct more than 25 years ago while counseling a high school student — actions for which he submitted his resignation to Pope John Paul II — has haunted him even as it shaped his ministry.

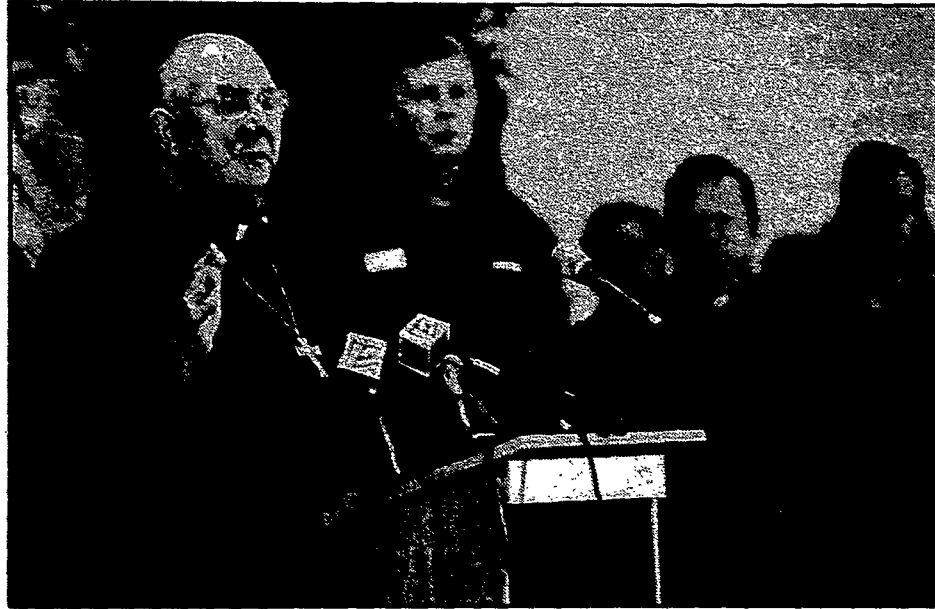
"It always hung over me," the bishop said at a 40-minute press conference March 8. "I don't think I have ever preached without being conscious (of it). I certainly have been powerfully motivated in my preaching."

Christopher Dixon, a former priest, sparked the bishop's decision to resign when he told a reporter from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* that he was 15 and in the ninth grade at St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary in Hannibal, Mo., when he sought counseling with then-Father O'Connell, who was the seminary rector.

Dixon said that relationship became an opportunity for the priest to molest him. He said he and the priest would lie naked in bed next to each other and the priest would touch him inappropriately.

Bishop O'Connell said he touched the boy, but it was a part of counseling some considered acceptable in the 1970s. He said his intent was to help the boy, not hurt him, but he should have known better.

"Foolishly and stupidly and naively, I attempted to work with him to help him to deal with his problems," Bishop O'Connell said. "I've always been a do-gooder. I've always been one who thought he could change things, always. I think that's part of my strength. But I also preach that in our strength always lies also the potential for our greatest weaknesses and challenges. I was as wrong as could be in taking that kind



Lannis Waters/CNS

Bishop Anthony J. O'Connell of Palm Beach, Fla., answers questions during a press conference in Palm Beach Gardens March 8. The bishop submitted his resignation after acknowledging sexual misconduct with a teenage seminarian more than 25 years ago.

of an approach."

In September 1988 Bishop O'Connell became bishop of Knoxville, Tenn. In 1996, the Diocese of Jefferson City, Mo., in which the seminary was located, paid Dixon \$125,000 in a settlement that was kept confidential at Dixon's request.

In June 1998 Bishop J. Keith Symons admitted to molesting five altar boys during the 1970s and resigned as bishop of Palm Beach. The following January, Bishop O'Connell was installed as his successor.

Bishop O'Connell said that when he was asked in November 1998 to replace Bishop Symons, he didn't tell anyone that he, too, had been accused of sexual misconduct — a decision he said he now regrets.

"I thought this incident was settled to everybody's satisfaction and it was sealed, (although) I would always be aware and conscious and would always do penance for it, and it would always color my approach to things. Nevertheless, I didn't bring it up at the time."

Although Bishop O'Connell and Dixon do not disagree on what happened more than 20 years ago, they have very different opinions on what it meant.

"There was nothing in the relationship that was anything other than touches," Bishop O'Connell said. "There was nothing beyond that, nothing of any sexual nature beyond that. So in the ordinary understanding of sexual activity, there wasn't, and I certainly want to make sure that my people know that."

Bishop O'Connell also apologized at the press conference.

"I am truly, deeply sorry for pain, hurt, anger and confusion that will result from all of this," he said. "And then for those who will be angry and for those who will have a lot of worries and concerns, I certainly ask for, when the time is right, for them to be able to pray for my forgiveness and pray even for the ability themselves to forgive me."

Bishop O'Connell said Dixon's continued suffering is particularly troubling. He

said he and Dixon were "great friends," although he added that the two have not spoken for years and have had no contact since the original settlement when he wrote the former student a letter of apology.

"My heart bleeds for Chris Dixon. It grieves me that he would suffer," he said. "We remained great friends afterward. We have always been great friends."

Bishop O'Connell told reporters that another man who was in a similar situation as a teen may yet come forward.

"There could be one other person. There was a somewhat similar situation about the same time, roughly. I don't want to get into it because I don't want to stir up anything. I'm just saying there could be another possibility," Bishop O'Connell said.

The bishop said he hoped that through everything people would remember that the church is not about him and his actions or the people in his office, but about Jesus Christ.

Earlier March 8, Bishop O'Connell spoke to diocesan staff and priests in separate meetings. He submitted his resignation to the Vatican March 7, as the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* was preparing to run the story.

As he spoke to the media, 24 priests from the diocese stood behind him. Several religious sisters and pastoral staff members attended the conference.

Deacon Sam Barbaro, diocesan communications director, said the priests were eager to show their support.

"The bishop met with the priests this morning and over and over and over, one priest after the other stood up and told the bishop, 'Don't resign,'" he said. "Many members of the presbyterate were there and they begged this man not to leave this diocese."

Long Island priest, parishioner killed



LYNBROOK, N.Y. (CNS) — A Long Island priest and a 70-year-old parishioner were killed by a gunman during morning Mass March 12.

Father Lawrence M. Penzes, 50, and the unidentified woman were shot just after the priest finished the homily during the 9 a.m. Mass at Our Lady of Peace Church in Lynbrook, according to Karen Montalbano, a spokeswoman for the Rockville Centre Diocese.

Associated Press reported that Father Penzes was shot in the back and the woman was shot in the face. Her name was not immediately released.

A rifle was recovered, though it wasn't immediately clear whether it was used in the shooting.

A police spokesman told the Long Island daily newspaper, *Newsday*, that the gunman fled after firing the shots. He was chased by two members of the congregation, including an off-duty Lynbrook police lieutenant. The parishioners were able to wrestle the gun away from the suspect, who then ran into a nearby apartment building.

Several hours after the shooting, police still had the apartment building surrounded.

The 400 students at the parish's elementary school were kept in their classrooms and parents were told they would not be released until the suspect was in custody.

The priest and the woman were identified as Father Penzes and a woman who was not named.

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