

WORLD & NATION

Former Palm Beach bishop named in 4th suit

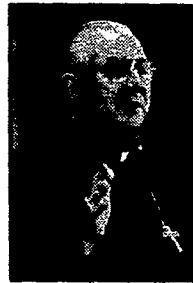
By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — A federal lawsuit filed in Missouri April 18 against Bishop Anthony J. O'Connell marked the fourth accusation of child molestation against the former bishop of Palm Beach, Fla.

Bishop O'Connell has been in seclusion since March 8, when he announced his resignation as bishop and acknowledged sexual misconduct with a high school seminarian in Hannibal, Mo., when he was the seminary rector. The victim had received a \$125,000 out-of-court settlement in 1996.

On March 18 another former high school seminarian filed a lawsuit claiming that then-Father O'Connell turned counseling sessions into an opportunity for sexual activity. A third suit was filed March 22.

Following the new accusation, Bishop John R. Gaydos of Jefferson City, Mo., said the Hannibal seminary, operated by the diocese and already facing low enrollment and significant annual deficits, would close



at the end of the current school year. He said revelations of the 1970's abuses would make recruitment "very difficult."

Unlike previous lawsuits, the April 18 claim alleges that the relationship began in the seminary and ended only in the 1990s. Bishop O'Connell became bishop of Knoxville, Tenn., in 1988 and of Palm Beach in 1998.

The complaint alleges that since 1994 the plaintiff has received more than \$21,000 in monthly payments from Bishop O'Connell, with a final payment received March 4.

Two of the suits have been filed under the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, also known as RICO, claiming a conspiracy among bishops "to conceal wrongdoing, avoid prosecution and public scandal and obstruct justice."

An effort to invoke the RICO statute in

a clergy sex abuse lawsuit in New Jersey was dismissed in 1995.

Also named in the suit were the Vatican; the dioceses of Palm Beach, Knoxville and Jefferson City; and Bishop Raymond J. Boland of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo.

The plaintiff alleges he reported the abuse to Bishop Boland in 1994. On April 19 Bishop Boland denied the claim, saying he has no recollection of any conversation alleging sexual abuse by Bishop O'Connell.

Since January — when national attention focused on the criminal child abuse trial of a defrocked Boston priest and failures in the Boston Archdiocese to remove child molesters from ministry — the scandal has spread across the country, with new allegations of past crimes emerging almost daily.

In New Jersey the first of several court hearings was under way in mid-April in a class-action suit by 18 people claiming to

have been molested by clergy of the Camden Diocese. Early testimony focused on allegations that now-retired Msgr. Philip Rigney, 85, repeatedly molested two teenage brothers from 1978 to 1982.

In Los Angeles police said Father Stephen Hernandez, 68, tried to kill himself April 15 when he learned he was being investigated for alleged child abuse. According to police, the retired priest was in stable condition in an undisclosed hospital.

A priest in Florida, Salesian Father Louis Molinelli, was exonerated of a sex abuse allegation and returned as principal of St. Petersburg Catholic High School after being suspended briefly during an investigation.

The order said the priest passed a lie detector test and that the accuser's demands of confidentiality, no lawyers, no information to the press or police and a quick cash settlement prompted suspicions.

U.S. and Canadian priests meet

By Michael Swan
Catholic News Service

TORONTO — The first joint convention for U.S. and Canadian priests' councils included special sessions to clear the air on sexual abuse scandals and the rights of priests under canon and civil law.

Yet, at the close of the four-day convention, the head of the U.S. council pointed out there was more to their discussions of the image and role of priests than the evolving sexual abuse scandals.

"There's a real hysteria around this issue of child sexual abuse," said Father Robert Silva of Stockton, Calif., president of the National Federation of Priests' Councils.

The federation is the association of presbyterial councils that advise bishops on affairs of their dioceses — from personnel appointments to policy. Several priests at the convention praised Ottawa Archbishop Marcel Gervais' April 15 opening address on biblical images of the priesthood.

"What this did for me was keep it focused," said Father Fred Klotter of Louisville, Ky. "We're still a group of people who are still about something."

Father Frank Cloherty of Boston said he found the archbishop's contrast of the liturgical and royal priesthood of Aaron with the day-to-day leadership of Moses a useful insight into where the priesthood stands today.

"It's not a power thing. It's a service thing," Father Cloherty said.

An occasional hobbyist sailor, Father Cloherty likened the current situation for U.S. priests to being on the water in a fog.

"When you get in a fog, you don't panic," he said. "Can we stay in there for long enough to know that God is in the boat?"

Archbishop Gervais urged the priests to be true to the prophetic tradition.

"I think most of us became priests because there was something in our guts that said 'You gotta do it,'" Archbishop Gervais said. "And if we stay priests, it's because — as Jeremiah says — we've been seduced."

Being seduced by God led to trouble for Jeremiah, as it will for today's priests, Archbishop Gervais said.

"He's taken us. We may want to get out of it, but we can't get out of it," the archbishop said. "God bless you that you stay. It's wonderful that you do so. I'm so encouraged that you do, and I say to you, 'Keep up the good work.'"

Father Silva said he thinks priests need to have a word or two with their bosses, many of whom have been criticized for reassigning known sexual abusers.

"I do think we can't let the bishops determine our lives," said Father Silva. "The bishops are wonderful, because they are priests. But priests have to take responsibility for their lives. This is new territory

for us. We need to speak more and more and more — and rationally, intelligently, and partner with the bishops in developing new ways of being a priest in society."

Priests serving on personnel committees usually do not have information about past allegations of abuse, and they probably should, said Father Silva.

Individually and through their associations, priests are going to have to open a dialogue with bishops and the laity about Catholic expectations of priests, he said.

"And we're going to have to be courageous, because ... the old monarchical, top-down model is still in play in a lot of places," Father Silva said.

Canadian priests, who went through a storm of media and legal attention in the 1980s following abuse cases in Newfoundland and other provinces, cannot easily divorce themselves from the U.S. scandals, said Father Tony Daniels, outgoing president of the National Federation of Presbyterial Councils of Canada.

"It's not an American problem. It's a world problem," said Father Daniels. "It is a Canadian problem."



Reuters/CNS

Church standoff continues

Smoke from an explosion rises above the cross of a church in Bethlehem, West Bank, April 22. Some 200 Palestinian gunmen remained holed up at the Church of the Nativity while Pope John Paul II urged an end to the armed standoff.

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