

Bishop asks 3 priests accused of abuse to resign

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article refers to reported instances of abuse by priests as "alleged" because only one of the six has been convicted in a court of law. The Diocese of Rochester considers the allegations to be credible, however, according to Michael Tedesco, diocesan director of communications.

By Jennifer Ficaglia
Assistant Editor

As the Diocese of Rochester begins to investigate a third case of alleged sexual abuse by a priest, preliminary changes in the diocese's sex-abuse policy have resulted in the resignations of three area pastors and the placement of further restrictions on three other priests.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark also has decided to begin reporting to the authorities all allegations of sexual abuse of mi-

nors by priests. Previously the bishop had expressed concern about doing so, fearing that it might deter victims from coming forward. After talking to victims, however, he decided that reporting is necessary.

"The public good and the integrity of our policies and procedures are best served if henceforth we report allegations of abuse," Bishop Clark said in an interview last week.

Bishop Clark asked for and on May 2 received the resignations of Father Thomas Burr, pastor of St. Mary Our Mother Parish in Horseheads; Father Foster Rogers, pastor of St. Pius Tenth Parish in Chili; and Father David Simon, pastor of St. Paul Parish in Rochester. After a two-month review of diocesan files, it was discovered that each of the priests had been accused in the mid-1970s of sexual

abuse involving teenagers. The diocese said it had relied on contemporary literature and the advice of the psychiatric community at the time in determining that all three could return to ministry after the allegations were lodged against them.

After conversations with victims of the alleged abuse and reading about what an abuse victim experiences, Bishop Clark decided that any priest against whom credible allegations of sexual abuse of a minor are or have been made cannot continue in any form of ministry.

"They did not quarrel with the allegations that were made (at the time)," Bishop Clark said of the three dismissed priests.

Fathers Burr, Rogers and Simon have had their faculties as priests removed, they are not permitted to wear clerical

clothing and will no longer be allowed to live in any parish or diocesan dwelling, the bishop said.

Bishop Clark added that the diocese has not received any other complaints in connection with the three priests, and that the priests had assured the diocese that no others should be expected.

"We have no indications whatsoever of any misconduct on their part" since the 1970s, the bishop said.

Abuse allegations recently surfaced against Father Robert O'Neill, who retired as pastor of St. Christopher Parish in North Chili last June due to health issues. Father O'Neill will no longer be able to continue in any form of ministry, the bishop said, and likewise will not be able to wear clerical clothing or live in any parish or diocesan dwelling.

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Catholic Courier

DIocese of Rochester, New York ■ VOL. 113 NO. 30 ■ THURSDAY, MAY 9, 2002 ■ 75¢ ■ 12 PAGES

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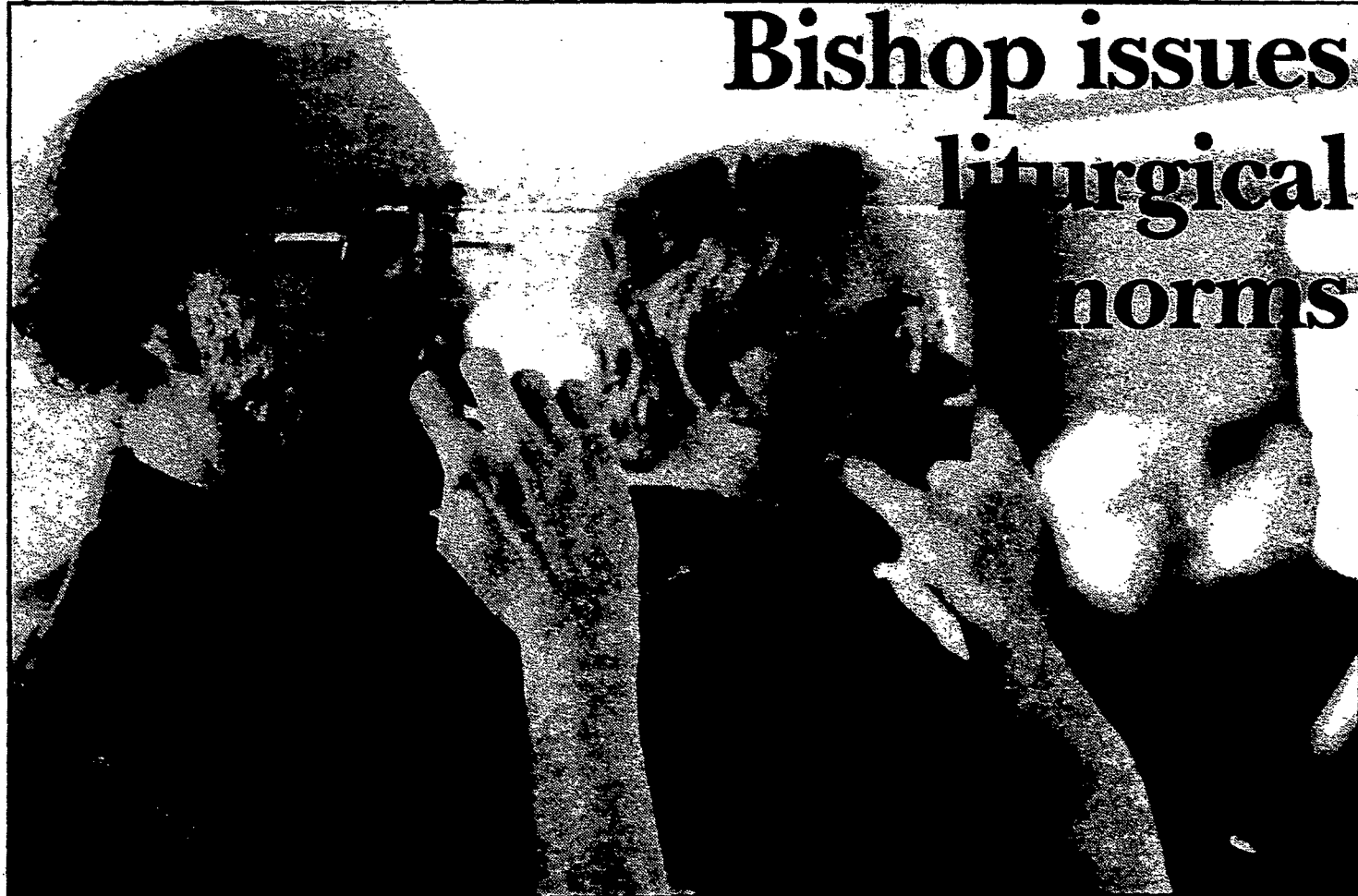
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Bishop issues liturgical norms



Fathers Bob Werth (left), of the Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward, and Peter Clifford, of St. Michael's in Newark, listen during a May 1 workshop on new liturgical norms. Below, Margaret Ostromecki, a pastoral associate at Our Lady Queen of Peace in Brighton, listens to Bishop Matthew H. Clark discussing the norms.

Joan Workmaster, diocesan director of liturgy, has fielded numerous inquiries — sometimes, complaints — about incidents when people other than priests or deacons preached and/or read the Gospel during Sunday Mass.

In a 1997 *Courier* article, Father Kevin McKenna, former diocesan chancellor, ascribed such incidents to "misunderstandings" and "a need for clarification," saying regulations for parishes would be helpful.

Indeed, on April 24, Bishop Matthew H. Clark issued to all diocesan pastors and pastoral administrators a set of norms on lay preaching. Citing canon law and other Catholic Church regulations, the norms emphasize such key points as:



- The reading of the Gospel during the celebration of the Eucharist is reserved to the ordained (priests and deacons only).

- Lay preaching cannot occur "within the celebration of the Eucharist at the moment reserved for the homily ... (W)e understand the term 'homily' to designate preaching at liturgical celebrations by the priest who presides, another priest, or a deacon."

- It is "highly desirable" for a celebrant to preach at the same Mass. However, lay people may preach in special circumstances: "It is the responsibility of pastors to determine when preaching by lay persons may be useful or necessary."

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STORY BY MIKE LATONA • PHOTOS BY ANDREA DIXON