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A former priest has sued the Archdiocese of St. Louis, alleging it libeled and slandered him by including him on a list of clerics credibly accused of abusing children.

Michael Toohey, 77, of Creve Coeur, claims in the lawsuit filed last month in St. Louis County Circuit Court that the archdiocese intentionally damaged his reputation, refused to provide more details of any allegation against him and denied his challenge of the claim, reports the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

At issue is a list the archdiocese released this summer that included the names of 63 men with substantiated allegations of sexual abuse of a minor. Twenty-six of those men, including Toohey, had never been named publicly as facing such allegations.

In an interview with the Post-Dispatch in September, Toohey denied sexually abusing anyone and said the archdiocese never told him he had been accused of sex abuse of a minor until the list was released. He said he and an attorney met with the archdiocese after the list was released but that church officials refused to discuss information about his case.

Toohey, who served as a priest at three St. Louis-area parishes from 1967 until 1970, has said that he left the priesthood of his own volition in 1970 because he felt the church had become too permissive on issues including contraception and divorce. He later worked for trade groups in St. Louis, including the Home Builders Association of St. Louis, and in Georgia.

The archdiocese has declined to release more details about the cases or the clergy's parish assignments, citing concerns about the alleged victims' privacy and the impact on the faith community, but it maintains on its website a list of the accused clergy as well as the names of three former clergy who had possessed child pornography.

The list was compiled after a months-long inspection of diocesan records by former FBI and law enforcement agents whose findings were reviewed by a lay board before publication, according to the archdiocese. Church officials have said an allegation is "substantiated" if the review board found enough evidence to show the allegation is "more likely true than not true."

The archdiocese said in a statement Wednesday that the archdiocese is "confident in its position" regarding Toohey's case, the first example in its records of a current or former clergy accused of abuse suing the archdiocese. Several similar lawsuits have been filed elsewhere.

"The Archdiocese of St. Louis does not discuss details of specific cases, but is prepared to defend against the allegations made by Mr. Toohey and is confident in its position," the statement read.

The suit seeks a jury trial to consider monetary damages.

David Clohessy, a longtime advocate with the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said he hopes Toohey's suit forces court filings that reveal more information about the allegations against the men on the archdiocese's list.

"The more information we have about credibly accused molesters, the safer society is," Clohessy said.

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