News



by Peter Feuerherd

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Recounting the trail of sex abuse crimes that ended with Fr. Romano Ferraro in a Massachusetts prison serving a life sentence, representatives from the Minnesota-based Jeff Anderson & Associates law firm came to Long Island, New York, with a warning for victims delivered at a Nov. 15 press conference at the Marriott Hotel in Uniondale.

Those abused by Ferraro , they said, need to put in a claim for compensation by Dec. 21 to the Diocese of Brooklyn, New York, which ordained Ferraro in 1968.

Court documents show that Ferraro served not only in the Brooklyn Diocese but also in the Rockville Centre Diocese on Long Island. Records released at the press conference indicate that Ferraro also worked as a priest in New Jersey and Missouri, as well as in Florida and the Philippines, two places where he served as a naval chaplain.

Over the past year, the New York Archdiocese and the Dioceses of Brooklyn and Rockville Centre have established programs to compensate victims of clergy sex abuse, most of whom are unable to press criminal or civil cases because of the state's statute of limitations. The funds are administered by independent arbitrator

Kenneth Feinberg.

The three dioceses established different deadlines for victims seeking compensation, creating confusion in cases involving priests who victimized children in a diocese where they were not ordained, said Anderson attorney Mike Reck.

Camille Biros, co-administrator of the three diocesan compensation programs, told NCR Nov. 21 that any confusion arising over a deadline involving a priest who worked in a diocese different from where they were ordained would not be used to penalize victims seeking redress.

"We would absolutely accept that claim," she said.

Carolyn Erstad, spokesperson for the Brooklyn Diocese, said the diocese wants to encourage applications to its program. "In no way are we trying to make it difficult for survivors to apply," she said, noting the diocese has run ads promoting the program on social media, in the Brooklyn Tablet diocesan newspaper and the New York Daily News.

Earlier this month, the Brooklyn Diocese announced on its website that Ferraro was among 13 priests from the diocese who were laicized because of sex abuse issues.

Neither the Brooklyn Diocese nor the Rockville Centre Diocese has reached out to Ferraro's victims, said Reck, whose firm represents a victim from Long Island.

A statement from the Rockville Centre Diocese disputed that claim.

That statement said that Ferraro was never officially assigned in the diocese but did celebrate Mass at St. Joseph's Church in Kings Park from 1974 to 1977. It added that the diocese informed the parish community of Ferraro's conviction in Massachusetts in 2004.

Ferraro experienced what church leadership circles described as a "geographic solution" to problems posed by sex abusers, said Patrick Wall, a consultant to the Anderson firm and a former Benedictine priest and canon lawyer. As was common practice in the 1970s and beyond, Ferraro was allowed to work in other dioceses even after his offenses became known.

"They kept moving him around," said Wall.

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Reck said Long Island was a "dumping ground" for abusive priests from outside the Rockville Centre Diocese, besides crimes committed by those ordained for the diocese, which covers Nassau and Suffolk counties. According to Wall, 66 priests who worked in the Rockville Centre Diocese have been credibly accused of sex abuse.

At the press conference, the Anderson firm distributed copies of a 1977 memo written by then-Brooklyn chancery official Msgr. Anthony Bevilacqua, later the cardinal archbishop of Philadelphia, who died in 2012. In the memo, Ferraro was said to have admitted to sexual abuse with teenage boys on at least three occasions. The memo also said Ferraro was dismissed from the Navy after an incident with a minor boy. Bevilacqua recommended that the priest be temporarily relieved of his duties and be treated by a psychiatrist.

Still, Ferraro later served in parishes in Brooklyn, Queens and Suffolk County, New York, and assisted in parishes in the St. Louis Archdiocese while receiving treatment at the House of Affirmation there in the early 1980s. He also worked in parishes in New Jersey until he was convicted in Massachusetts of sex abuse in 2004.

[Peter Feuerherd is a frequent contributor to NCR.]