News



Former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, right, and Cardinal William Keeler, retired archbishop of Baltimore, arrive for the opening Mass of the National Prayer Vigil for Life at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, Jan. 21, 2010. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)



by Peter Feuerherd

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

August 1, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Updated with new information 12:30 p.m. Central Daylight Time

Fr. Desmond Rossi, a priest of the Albany, New York, Diocese, has won a new hearing as the Archdiocese of Newark will investigate a pastor in New Jersey who he says sexually assaulted him.

Rossi made the revelations in an America Magazine article by Michael J. O'Loughlin that was posted last month. In the article, Rossi stated that as a seminarian for the Archdiocese of Newark in 1988, two fellow seminarians, then transitional deacons, attacked him at St. Benedict's Church Rectory in Newark. At the time, Rossi was serving his pastoral year at the parish.

On August 2, Rossi was notified that Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark has asked the Archdiocesan Office of Canonical Affairs to re-examine his case, 15 years after an archdiocesan review board determined that Rossi's case was credible, but that his allegations could not be substantiated at the time. Both of his alleged attackers were allowed to continue in ministry. One is currently a pastor, the other, who was a pastor, is deceased.

"That is very good news," Rossi told NCR.

The original story follows.

Fr. Desmond Rossi, a priest of the Albany, New York, Diocese, wants the Archdiocese of Newark to investigate a pastor in New Jersey who he says sexually assaulted him.

Rossi made the revelations in an America magazine article by Michael J. O'Loughlin that was posted last month. In the article, Rossi stated that as a seminarian for the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey, in 1988, two fellow seminarians, then transitional deacons, attacked him at St. Benedict's Parish rectory in Newark. At the time, Rossi was serving his pastoral year at the parish.

Rossi identified the alleged attackers to NCR, one of whom is a pastor in the Archdiocese of Newark. NCR left phone messages at the priest's parish that were not returned. Another was a pastor who is now deceased. NCR has decided not to reveal

their names as they have not been criminally or civilly charged.

Rossi told America that the two forced themselves upon him and coerced him into oral sex. The article did not name the alleged attackers.

An Archdiocese of Newark Review Board panel that considered the case in 2003 described Rossi's charges as "credible" but unable to be substantiated. Both of the alleged assailants continued in ministry.

"They were friends of mine," Rossi told NCR, explaining why he did not immediately press charges. "This was a twisted loyalty, a traumatic bond with the abusers."

In the America article, Rossi said that former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, then archbishop of Newark, groomed him sexually and sexually harassed other seminarians. He said his alleged assailants took advantage of the example McCarrick set. McCarrick, who served in Newark from 1986 to 2000, when he was named archbishop of Washington, D.C., resigned from the College of Cardinals in July after accusations of sexual abuse directed against minors and harassment of seminarians came to light.

Related: Reactions to McCarrick's withdrawal from the college of cardinals

Rossi left the Archdiocese of Newark and was ordained for the Albany Diocese, where he serves as the parochial vicar at St. Mary's Church in Glens Falls.

In a statement, the Archdiocese of Newark noted that the living accused pastor remains a priest in good standing. The statement pointed to the review board's determination that the charges were unsubstantiated.

James Goodness, archdiocesan spokesman, said that archdiocesan officials promptly informed civil authorities about the case as soon as they were told about it in 2003. Archbishop John Myers then led the archdiocese. After his retirement in 2016, he was replaced by Cardinal Joseph Tobin, the current archbishop.

After the findings of the review board, which includes law enforcement and mental health experts, the archdiocese provided funds for counseling. Rossi said that amounted to $35,000.

Goodness said that no other charges of abuse were ever filed against the two accused priests.

Another New York priest, who wished to remain anonymous, told NCR that he was a fellow seminarian with Rossi at Immaculate Conception Seminary in South Orange, New Jersey. Within a week of the event, he said, Rossi told him about the alleged assault.

At the time the review board was researching the case, the anonymous priest said he received a call from a cleric in Newark. "I didn't know that he [Rossi] had petitioned the review board. I didn't know who I was talking to." The priest said the call came right before a Saturday evening Mass, and at the time he told the caller he knew nothing about the case.

That priest is now willing to testify in front of the archdiocesan review board to being told about the assault.

Rossi said his case reveals fundamental flaws in the church's response to sex abuse.

Because he was 26 and not a minor at the time of the alleged assault, "They were never found legally culpable. This is the gap in the charter. They fell through the cracks." In 2002 the U.S. bishops enacted the Dallas Charter, which stated that no priest or deacon who sexually abused a minor would be allowed to continue in ministry.

At the time he was assaulted, McCarrick's power over seminarians as an archbishop made it difficult for him to extricate himself from the situation, said Rossi. He credited Bishop Edward Scharfenberger of Albany with providing support for him as he has made his experience public.

"His comment to me was that the truth has to get out," said Rossi about his discussions with his bishop. "It's because of the support of Bishop Scharfenberger that I feel protected in the institution," he said.

In a statement, Scharfenberger referenced both Rossi and McCarrick, without mentioning either by name.

"Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, many of our faithful are now feeling betrayed and abandoned by their spiritual fathers, especially the bishops," he wrote.

He said the church is undergoing "a profoundly spiritual crisis" that can only be addressed by clerics who live the ideals they profess. He stated that the Dallas Charter needs to be amended to include bishops who sexually abuse and harass

others.

Advertisement

Rossi said he would like to see a full investigation of the Immaculate Conception Seminary, whether by church or civic authorities. He would also like to reach out to other seminarians who have suffered abuse and have walked away from a possible priestly vocation.

The America article, as well as an interview on National Public Radio, generated support from as far away as South Africa.

Rossi's ultimate goal, he said, is "to get this cleaned up as much as I can. I am trying to be a loyal son to the church. We have to take our church back."

His parishioners in Glens Falls have also been supportive. He told them about his case at Masses on the weekend of July 22. The first reading of the day was from Jeremiah, and began "Woe to the shepherds," a prophetic diatribe against morally suspect religious leaders.

The theme was pertinent, said Rossi. "The Lord handed it to me, right in my lap." He said he wants his living accused abuser to get therapy before ever being allowed to serve in ministry again.

[Peter Feuerherd is a correspondent for NCR's Field Hospital series on parish life and is a professor of journalism at St. John's University, New York.]