News



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A priest who once served in the Diocese of Greensburg, Pennsylvania, was sentenced to prison for sexually molesting a boy in the 1990s.

Fr. John Sweeney, 76, received a sentence of 11 months to five years in state prison and must register as a sex offender for 10 years, a judge in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, said Dec. 21.

The priest pled guilty in July to misdemeanor indecent assault on a minor after he was accused of abusing a 10-year-old boy while counseling him about misbehaving on a school bus.

Sweeney, who retired in 2016, is the first priest convicted of charges stemming from a Pennsylvania grand jury investigation that focused on allegations of abuse. He was arrested in July 2017 for the incident that occurred during the 1991-92 school year

at St. Margaret Mary School in Lower Burrell, about 25 miles northeast of Pittsburgh.

The grand jury subsequently issued a report in August detailing allegations against 300 priests that involved more than 1,000 children over 70 years in six of the state's eight dioceses.

Meanwhile, the Archdiocese of New York suspended an elderly priest who had been celebrating Mass in two states despite settlements paid for allegations of sexual abuse of teenage boys.

Catholic News Service could not reach Joseph Zwilling, archdiocesan communications director, for comment. He told The New York Times that Fr. Donald Timone would no longer be allowed to remain in ministry while church officials consider if he will be permanently removed from ministry.

Timone, who retired in 2009, was in residence at St. Joseph Church in Middletown, New York, and celebrated Mass at the parish as recently as early December, the newspaper reported. He also was serving as chaplain, spiritual adviser and teacher at John Paul the Great Catholic University in Escondido, California, visiting every few months, a school official said.

Lidy Connolly, vice president of administration at the university, told Catholic News Service Dec. 27 the archdiocese informed the school Dec. 20 that Timone's letter of good standing had been revoked. She said he no longer worked at the school.

The New York Archdiocese's Independent Reconciliation and Compensation Program made settlements in spring 2017 to two victims who alleged that Timone abused them while they were undergoing counseling. The program was established to compensate victims of clergy sex abuse who agreed to release the archdiocese from further legal claims.

During 2002 and 2003 the archdiocesan review board investigated one allegation against Timone and determined that the claim could not be substantiated.

The review board, which is separate from the compensation program, continued to weigh the allegations in late December, Zwilling said in an email to the New York Times.

Timone also worked with Courage, a Catholic organization dedicated to the pastoral care of homosexuals.

Fr. Philip Bochanski, Courage executive director, said in a letter posted on the organization's website that Timone had worked with the ministry from the late 1980s until his retirement in 2009, except for the time the New York archdiocesan review board was investigating the abuse allegation.

The posting said there were no abuse allegations against Timone related to his work with Courage.

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In addition, at Gonzaga University, a Jesuit-run school in Spokane, Washington, two priests resigned as vice presidents over questions about the handling of abuse allegations against other clergy, the Spokesman-Review in Spokane reported.

Gonzaga President Thayne McCulloh announced the resignations Dec. 21 of Jesuit Frs. Frank Case and Pat Lee in a letter to faculty, staff and students.

In an email to Catholic News Service Dec. 26, David Sonntag, associate vice president of marketing and communications at the school, declined to explain why the departures occurred, saying he could not discuss personnel matters.

The resignation of Case followed a report by the Northwest News Network and the Center for Investigative Reporting in mid-December. The report revealed Case recommended Jesuit Fr. James Poole, who had been accused as early as 1960 of sexually abusing Alaska Native women and girls, for a job as chaplain at a Tacoma, Washington, hospital in 1989. Case was head of the Jesuits' Oregon Province at the time.

Case has said he was unaware of the accusations.

He had served as vice president at Gonzaga since 2011 and was widely known as the chaplain for the nationally ranked men's basketball team.

The situation surrounding Lee's resignation was less clear. He had been the university's vice president of mission and ministry since 2016 and served as vice president of mission from 2005 to 2008.

Lee also served as a Jesuit provincial.