News



by Peter Feuerherd

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Bishop Richard Malone of Buffalo, New York, has suspended three priests after seminarians complained about lewd comments allegedly made by the clergy at an April 11 party at Saints Peter and Paul Rectory in Hamburg, New York.

In announcing the suspensions, the diocese issued a statement indicating that the suspended priests participated in "unsuitable, inappropriate and insensitive conversations."

The three suspended priests are Fr. Arthur Mattulke, pastor of Saints Peter and Paul, who is also a spiritual director for seminarians; Fr. Patrick O'Keefe, parochial vicar of Saints Peter and Paul; and Fr. Robert Orlowski, pastor of Our Mother of Good Counsel in Blasdell, New York. Two other priests present at the party were reprimanded by the diocese for not putting an end to the allegedly objectionable discussions.

The suspended priests will undergo psychological evaluation and retraining in sexual harassment concerns, the diocesan statement said.

Buffalo television station WKBW reported that the lewd remarks directed to seminarians included a priest describing overhearing the parents of one of the seminarians having sex on a diocesan retreat, the description of a priest of the diocese pursuing sex at truck stops, and a priest questioning a woman on the phone

in front of the seminarians, asking if she wanted to have sex with them. WKBW declined to air many of the specific complaints as the statements were considered too graphic for broadcast television.

The suspensions come after a series of sexual abuse concerns raised in the past year in the Diocese of Buffalo. In the past year, the diocese released a list of 42 priests accused of abuse, only to raise that number to 176 in subsequent revisions. A report on CBS' 60 Minutes featured Malone's former administrative assistant, who accused the diocese of covering up sex abuse cases.

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John Hurley, president of Canisius College, a Jesuit institution in Buffalo, told NCR that Malone apparently had little choice but to order the suspensions.

Hurley, part of the executive committee of the Movement to Restore Trust, a group of lay Catholics seeking reforms in the diocese on concerns about sex abuse and finances, said the response to the seminarians indicates that the diocese is taking such allegations seriously.

"They showed me that what is in place is working," he said, noting that the seminarians felt free to report the incident.

Hurley noted that a subcommittee of the Movement to Restore Trust suggested changes in the operations of Christ the King Seminary in East Aurora, New York, the diocesan seminary. The committee suggested that the seminary be moved to the city of Buffalo so that its operations become less insular and more connected to parish life.

The latest revelations were another blow to the Diocese of Buffalo, said Hurley.

"If it is true, this is very disconcerting. With everything going on it's a source of great concern," he said.

[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.]