News



In this Nov. 10, 2008, Bishop Michael Hoeppner, center, of Crookston, Minn., prays during a semi-annual meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. Hoeppner says he was trying to protect the confidentiality of a man who said he was sexually abused by a popular priest when he certified to other church officials that the priest was fit to work with children. Hoeppner of the Diocese of Crookston acknowledged in sworn testimony released Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2019, that he knew about sexual abuse allegations against the priest but was respecting the accuser's confidentiality. (AP/Steve Ruark, File)

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A Minnesota bishop who's the subject of a Vatican-ordered investigation said in sworn testimony released Tuesday that he was trying to protect the confidentiality of a man who said he was sexually abused by a popular priest when he certified to other church officials that the priest was fit for ministry and to work with children.

Bishop Michael Hoeppner of the Diocese of Crookston in northwestern Minnesota acknowledged in the videotaped deposition last year that he stated in writing to the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis in 2012 that Monsignor Roger Grundhaus was "a person of good moral character and reputation" and that he was unaware of anything in the priest's background that would "render him unsuitable to work with minor children."

But the accuser, Ron Vasek, had already told Hoeppner by 2011 that Grundhaus had abused him in the early 1970s when he was 16. Vasek was hoping to become a deacon when he met with the bishop. Vasek would later sue the diocese, alleging that the bishop blackmailed him into retracting his allegations. That lawsuit settled for an undisclosed sum in 2017.

Pressed by attorney Jeffrey Anderson on why he made that assertion to the archdiocese when he already knew about Vasek's allegations, the bishop replied that Vasek had asked him for "complete confidentiality" and that he was respecting that.

Anderson released the video, the letter to the archdiocese and other documents at a news conference where he called on the Vatican to remove Hoeppner immediately. Anderson received the documents and took Hoeppner's deposition in a lawsuit that ended in a $5 million settlement in July between the diocese and 15 people, including Vasek, who said they were abused by priests.

"The practices and the choices employed by Bishop Hoeppner, past and present, are perilous, and he continues to engage in an active pattern of concealment, deceit and deception of both his roles and allowing predators to remain in positions of power,"

Anderson charged.

Vasek said at the same news conference that it was "disturbing" to view the bishop's remarks.

"I've read the depositions, Vasek said. "Reading them is one thing, but seeing them is another."

Archbishop Bernard Hebda of St. Paul announced in September that the Vatican had asked him to conduct a preliminary investigation into allegations that Hoeppner interfered with investigations into clerical sexual misconduct. It was the first known investigation of one bishop by another under a groundbreaking church law issued by Pope Francis in May.

The Crookston Diocese said in a statement Tuesday that the bishop has "fully cooperated" with the investigation and has supplied the materials that Hebda sought.

"We await a response and remain hopeful that justice will prevail for all impacted by this action," the statement said.

Hoeppner said earlier that Grundhaus, who is retired, continues to deny Vasek's allegations. The bishop also said an independent investigator had cast doubt on those claims. And he said a review board that received the investigator's report had recommended restoring Grundhaus to priestly ministry — a step that hasn't happened yet.

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