News



Bishop Peter Libasci, center, arrives at the Cathedral of St. Joseph for his installation service as bishop of the Diocese of Manchester, Dec. 8, 2011, in Manchester, New Hampshire. (AP file/Jim Cole)

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A lawsuit filed earlier this month accuses the head of the Roman Catholic Church in New Hampshire of committing sexual abuse decades ago while he served as a priest in New York.

In a lawsuit filed July 14 in state Supreme Court in Suffolk County, Bishop Peter Libasci of the Diocese of Manchester is accused of abusing a male youth on numerous occasions in 1983 and 1984. The abuse resulted in "physical, psychological and emotional injuries," the suit says.

The diocese said in a statement that it was aware of the lawsuit and that the matter had been reported to civil authorities. The status of Libasci remains unchanged, it said.

"Because this is an ongoing matter and out of respect for the individuals involved, the Diocese will not be providing additional information at this time but will provide updates when we are able to do so," the statement said.

The lawsuit also named as defendants the Roman Catholic Church of Saints Cyril and Methodius and the Saints Cyril and Methodius School in Deer Park, New York, where Libasci was a pastor. The youth, who was 12 or 13 at the time, was a student at the school, which this year merged with another school to become Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic School.

The lawsuit also named Sisters of St. Joseph, which was responsible for activities at the school. It did not return calls seeking comment.

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The Diocese of Rockville Center, which includes Saints Cyril, said it had notified the Vatican of the lawsuit since the allegations involve a current diocesan bishop. It also reported the matter to the Suffolk County District Attorney.

"The Diocese of Rockville Centre remains committed to the ongoing work of creating a safe environment in the Church," the diocese said in a statement.

The Diocese of Rockville Center, which encompasses much of Long Island and 1.4 million Catholics, filed for bankruptcy last year after the state suspended the statute

of limitations for suing over sexual abuse by priests. More than 200 lawsuits have been brought against the diocese since the 2019 passage of a New York law that gives victims the right to sue over decades-old sexual abuse by clergy members, teachers and other adults.

The allegations against Libasci come less than two years after the Diocese of Manchester launched a public effort to address past abuse. In 2019, it released the names of 73 priests who had been accused of sexually abusing children as part of what it called an effort to take accountability for abuse that stretched as far back as 1950. Most of the named priests have died, and others either left the ministry or have been banned from public ministry as priests.

At the time, Libasci apologized for the abuse and said he prays daily that victims find healing and that "we never allow such darkness to enter our church again."

Before Libasci was named bishop as the 10th bishop of Manchester by Pope Benedict XVI in 2011, the Diocese of Manchester also came under fire for how it handled sexual abuse allegations.

In a 2002 agreement, the state of New Hampshire agreed not prosecute the diocese as an institution or any individuals for their past handling of sexual abuse allegations involving clergy. County attorneys still can pursue individual prosecutions.

In return, the diocese agreed to enact strict new child protection policies, admit its actions had harmed children and open itself up to a series of audits. The new policies included reporting all allegations to the attorney general's office and removing accused church personnel from their jobs.

In 2009, after the last audit was done, the attorney general's office said the diocese had improved its safeguards for children. But it recommended the diocese strengthen its background checks and take other steps.

The Associated Press generally does not identify people who say they are victims of sexual assault unless they consent to being identified publicly.