News



The Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul, the seat of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia, located in downtown Philadelphia. (Photo courtesy of Wikipedia/Creative Commons)

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In 2013, then-Catholic priest and would-be artist Kevin Barry McGoldrick was transferred from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to the Diocese of Nashville, where he became chaplain of Aquinas College.

In the lawsuit filed on April 18 in Philadelphia, it alleges that archdiocesan officials transferred the priest — and issued a letter of support on his behalf — knowing that he had a history of sexual abuse. The lawsuit accuses the archdiocese of enabling the priest's abuse in 2017 of the lawsuit's 27-year-old plaintiff, identified only as "Jane Doe."

"To know he should never have been at Aquinas College, and he was put there and I was put in harm's way knowingly, was perhaps the most traumatic," Jane Doe told Religion News Service.

The five-count lawsuit, entered in the Court of Common Pleas in Philadelphia County, names both McGoldrick and the archdiocese and asks for hundreds of thousands of dollars in damages.

Jane Doe's lawyers write in the complaint that the archdiocese's "callous indifference" to the safety and wellbeing of young women in their care "was a function of their paramount desire to protect the Church, even at the expense of innocent young persons."

A spokesperson for the archdiocese said they "would not comment on pending litigation."

Stewart Ryan, an attorney representing Jane Doe, said this case fits into a broader pattern of abuse coverups in the archdiocese. Too often, he said, priests suspected of abuse have been simply transferred from assignment to assignment. The lawsuit claims McGoldrick was re-assigned at least seven times.

The lawsuit also alleges that McGoldrick committed civil assault and battery. He could not be reached for comment in time for publication.

In the summer of 2017, Jane Doe, then 22, had just completed her junior year at Aquinas College, a 61-year-old school operated by the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia. McGoldrick, who was both a chaplain and her spiritual adviser, began regularly inviting her and other female students to his rectory for drinks and dinner, the lawsuit alleges.

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On one of these occasions, according to the lawsuit, he provided the plaintiff with so much alcohol she vomited, and he began touching her inappropriately. The plaintiff believes the sexual assault "continued and escalated" even after she had lost consciousness.

Jane Doe claims the alleged assault took a severe toll, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, emotional distress and other symptoms and forms of trauma. Jane Doe reported the assault to the Nashville diocese in 2019, but no action was taken until she filed a police report in 2020. She settled a lawsuit against the Nashville diocese in 2020 for $65,000.

That same year, the Philadelphia Archdiocese substantiated Jane Doe’s claims, but, she said, wasn’t seeking out other potential victims. According to the lawsuit, she persistently inquired about the possibility that others had been abused by McGoldrick, but the archdiocese denied knowledge of other victims.

Then, in fall 2022, she told RNS, she was horrified to learn through an online article that the archdiocese had known of at least two other sexual abuse allegations against the priest years before he assaulted her. Per the lawsuit, in "approximately 2013" — the same year McGoldrick was sent to Nashville — the archdiocese had investigated him for sexual abuse.

The news, she said, was crushing.

"In 2020, I had a lot of hope for pursuing justice within the church," the plaintiff told RNS. "I was a full time Catholic missionary at the time. It was my whole life. To witness, day after day after day, the church at every juncture making the wrong

decision, and not just sins of omission, but actually intentionally making the wrong decisions, that ate away at me."

Today, she no longer identifies as Catholic. She told RNS that in filing this lawsuit, she hopes to discover facts that have been withheld from her, to hold the archdiocese responsible for the harm they caused and to create space for victims of McGoldrick and other priests to be heard.

"I don’t think that you can even begin to have any semblance of justice unless there is responsibility taken," she said.