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Suspended priest arrested on charges of sexual abuse of minor in '90s

by Matthew Gambino by Catholic News Service

Philadelphia — Fr. Robert L. Brennan, a priest of the archdiocese of Philadelphia whose priestly faculties have been suspended since 2005, was arrested Thursday in Maryland on charges of sexually abusing a northeast Philadelphia boy between 1998 and 2001.

Philadelphia District Attorney Seth Williams made the announcement at a news conference in Philadelphia the same day.

Brennan, 75, was arrested on charges of rape, involuntary deviate sexual intercourse and aggravated indecent assault in Perryville, Md., where he was living in a private residence. He was being held in Maryland's Cecil County, where he faced an extradition hearing.

He was included in the 2005 Philadelphia Grand Jury report investigating incidents of sexual abuse of minors by clergy. The report cited a yearslong pattern of reports of inappropriate behavior, including touching and other physical contact, between Brennan and boys with whom he came into contact during his assignments at parishes and schools in the archdiocese.

One assignment was as parochial vicar at Resurrection of Our Lord Parish in northeast Philadelphia beginning in the 1990s. The district attorney alleges that during that time, a boy in the parish school was sexually assaulted over three years, from age 11 to 14, by Brennan.

The now 27-year-old man reported the assaults to the Philadelphia archdiocese in January.

Following its revised policy as a result of the 2006 and 2011 grand juries and the internal deliberations that resulted, the archdiocese immediately contacted the Philadelphia district attorney's office with the

report. The criminal investigation began at that time, resulting in the arrest nine months later.

Williams acknowledged the pain and difficulty victims of sexual abuse experience as they try to summon the courage to report incidents of abuse, oftentimes occurring years or decades earlier. He praised the "brave actions" of the victim who remained nameless.

He also added that the archdiocese "immediately, and by immediately I mean that same day, contacted the district attorney's office to share with us this report."

"It must be recognized that this is a sea change in the protocol and practices of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia," he said. "I spoke with Archbishop (Charles J.) Chaput (of Philadelphia) this morning, thanking him for the internal reforms that have been made, that this case demonstrates."

In a statement, the archdiocese said that since Chaput's arrival in Philadelphia in 2011, he has "reinforced the archdiocese's strong commitment to work with law enforcement in ensuring justice for victims of sexual assault. The archdiocese reports all allegations of sexual abuse of minors to public authorities."

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The statement also said a "canonical process aimed at (Brennan's) laicization is in progress with the Holy See." Laicization is a process whereby a priest is removed from the clerical state. Although he is still a priest, Brennan has not been permitted to minister or present himself as a priest anywhere since he was suspended in September 2005. He has lived in a private residence in Maryland since then.

Williams spoke at length during the news conference about Msgr. William Lynn, who is currently serving a three-to-six-year sentence for endangering the welfare of a child because of his supervisory role as secretary for clergy in the archdiocese under Philadelphia Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Williams and Evangelia Manos, assistant district attorney for special investigations, indicated that as a result of the new allegations against Brennan, additional child endangerment charges would have been brought against Lynn and the same new charges against other archdiocesan officials, who Williams did not identify, were it not for a provision of state law regarding the statute of limitations.

"The victim's age (27) puts his allegation three months beyond the statute of limitations for endangering the welfare of children," Williams said.

The criminal statute was amended in 2006 to extend the time frame for a victim making an allegation to age 50, but the extension concerns only charges against the perpetrator of the crime, not supervisors to whom child endangerment charges might apply.

Williams ended his press conference by applauding the courage of the victim to come forward with his allegation and encouraged other victims to do the same.

The archdiocese urged anyone with information regarding Brennan to contact the district attorney's office. It also said recognized that news of Brennan's arrest may be painful to victims of sexual violence, and offered support or assistance through its Victim Assistance Office.

[Matthew Gambino is director and general manager of CatholicPhilly.com, the online news site of the archdiocese of Philadelphia.]

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