

Bishop denies child sex abuse cover-up

By MELANIE BURNEY
Associated Press Writer

CAMDEN — The head of the Camden Diocese Monday denied charges by a Roman Catholic priest that church officials covered up a child sex abuse ring led by two clergy — one a former Millville priest.

“The overwhelming majority of priests are faithful to their vows and to their pastoral responsibilities. We are not prone to sexual abuse or other addictive disorders because of celibacy.”

— Bishop James McHugh

Bishop James T. McHugh denied allegations lodged last week in a civil lawsuit filed by three victims including a cleric. The alleged abuse spanned seven years and included parishes in Millville and Rhode Island.

“There is no justification for this behavior nor any reason to tolerate it,” McHugh told re-

porters at an afternoon news conference here at diocesan headquarters. “All sexual abuse, especially ... of children, is morally evil, gravely harmful and unjust.”

The plaintiffs are all former or current Millville residents. They include the Rev Gary R. Hayes, 40, a former Millville resident who is now a pastor in Henderson, Ky.,

and his mother Alfia Hayes, Steven M. Stolars and his son Steven, and Terrence Smith, all of Millville.

The lawsuit accuses McHugh and three other bishops of fraud and conspiracy for covering up the abuse of Smith and the younger Hayes and Stolars, and repeatedly reassigning accused pedophiles. The lawsuit, filed under racketeering statutes usually used to prosecute organized crime figures, seeks punitive and compensatory damages.

McHugh — the spiritual leader of about 374,000 Catholics in Cumberland, Salem, Camden, Gloucester, Atlantic and Cape May Counties — denied the charges and called the lawsuit “a legal fishing expedition.” A pending investigation by the diocese has been stalled by the lawsuit, he said.

The diocese has about 2,000 nuns and clerics, said McHugh. In the past 25 years, about a half-dozen have been found guilty of sexual abuse, he said.

“The overwhelming majority of priests are faithful to their vows and to their pastoral responsibilities,” McHugh said speaking publicly for the first time about the lawsuit. “We are not prone to sexual abuse or other addictive disorders because of celibacy.”

The lawsuit — described by attorneys as the first class-action case of its kind — sent shock waves through the Catholic Church. McHugh distributed a statement read at Mass ceremonies last weekend throughout

One cleric called the lawsuit “a homosexual and pro-abortion plot” to weaken the church. He called the abuse charges “ridiculous.”

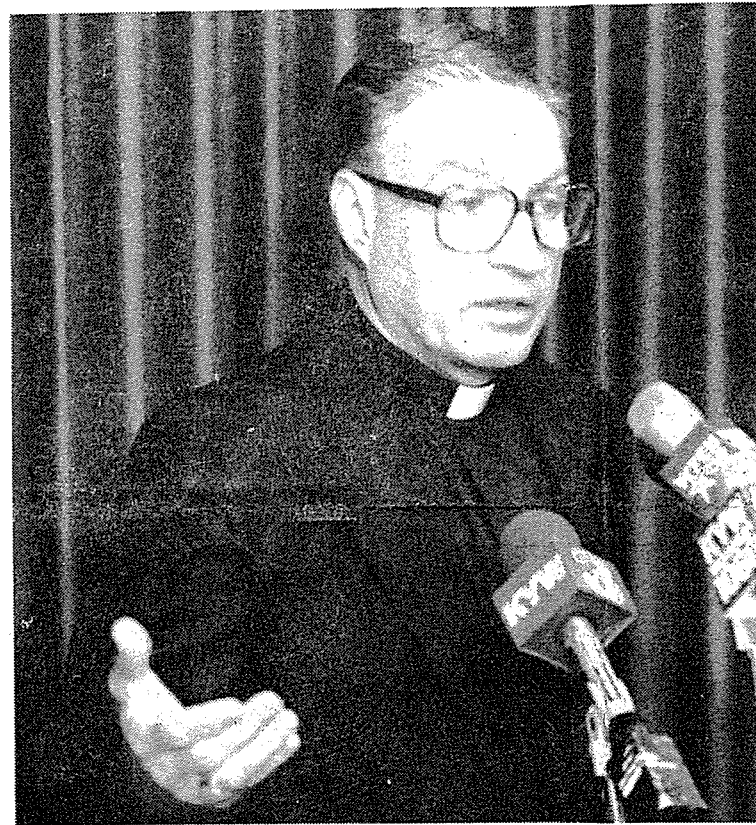
the diocese.

One cleric called the lawsuit “a homosexual and pro-abortion plot” to weaken the church. He called the abuse charges “ridiculous.”

“I look at this case as part of the continuing process to cripple the Catholic Church,” said Msgr. Salvatore Adamo, of St. Vincent Pallotti Church in Haddon Township. “If they could besmirch the priesthood ... they’ll have succeeded to a large degree.”

Attorney Stephen Rubino, who filed the lawsuit, did not immediately return telephone calls Monday.

Hayes, Smith and Stolars claim they suffered childhood molestation by two clerics who “conspired to create a sex ring” of



AP LaserPhoto

Bishop James T. McHugh, head of the Camden Diocese, speaks at a press conference Monday in Camden, where he denied allegations of child sex abuse by priests.

Please see Denial, page 5-A

Denial

children who could be sexually abused. The elder Stolars and Hayes joined the suit, claiming the revelations of abuse have disrupted their families and caused emotional hardship.

At a news conference last week, Hayes said he filed the lawsuit because church officials failed to investigate his allegations against the Rev. Joseph F. McGarvey, a former pastor of St. Mary Magdalen Church in Millville. Hayes lodged his charges with diocese officials in December.

McGarvey is accused of molesting the victims while he was pastor at St. Mary's Church in Millville from January 1965 to December 1972. The victims were aged 12 to 16 at the time.

The lawsuit also alleges that McGarvey and the Rev. William C. O'Connell, who was assigned to St. Mary's in Bristol, R.I., traveled back and forth between the two states specifically to molest Hayes and another young boy.

McGarvey is on an indefinite leave of absence from his current parish in Runnemedde and has not been available for comment. O'Connell resigned from the priesthood in 1985 and a year later was convicted of sexually assaulting three boys at his parish in Bristol, R.I.
