

Mom: Church didn't warn Cape residents of ex-priest

■ The Rhode Island mother claims her son was molested by the former priest charged in with similar offenses in Lower Township. She may have violated a gag provision in a civil settlement by speaking out.

By GEORGE STRAWLEY
Staff Writer

A Rhode Island mother who claims her son was molested years ago by a former priest now charged with similar offenses in New Jersey says Lower Township residents were "sitting ducks" because church officials did not track the man's where-

abouts.

Kathleen Guilfoyle of Narragansett, R.I., may have broken the terms of a gag provision in a 1990 civil settlement of a case involving former priest William O'Connell by releasing to the media a letter calling on the bishop of Providence, R.I., to resign.

Guilfoyle claimed her son was sexually assaulted by O'Connell in the '80s.

O'Connell had moved to New

Jersey after pleading no contest in 1986 to 26 sexual crimes against minors and serving a year in a prison work-release program. He was arrested earlier this month at his Villas home and faces 20 charges of sexual assault, obscenity and other offenses.

O'Connell was arraigned July 12 on those charges in Lower Township municipal court and did not enter a plea at the time.

"The people of the community of Lower Township, New Jersey, were absolute 'sitting ducks,' " Guilfoyle wrote in the letter to Bishop Louis E. Gelineau. "They had no idea of his background or history of pedophilia, and you did."

Guilfoyle said she may be putting her son's \$1 million settlement at risk, but hearing of new charges against O'Connell forced her to speak out.

"We were guaranteed through the civil litigation that the last thing we had to worry about was this guy getting his hands on little kids," Guilfoyle said in a telephone interview Friday.

But the Diocese of Providence issued a prepared statement in response to Guilfoyle, saying that Gelineau had no knowledge of where O'Connell lived.

"It is certainly our present policy to notify local church authorities when we know of the where-

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abouts of a known offender," the statement read. "However, the church cannot force a former priest to report his whereabouts, unless he is willing to do so."

The statement also refused to confirm or deny the existence of a confidentiality agreement regarding O'Connell.

Guilfoyle — whose son, now an adult, has a different surname — said she wanted to express her sympathies to Lower Township families allegedly victimized by O'Connell.

"I feel so badly," Guilfoyle

said. "I know what they've been through and what they're going to go through."

Guilfoyle said her son first met O'Connell at the age of 11 while serving the funeral Mass of a relative. The priest became a family friend over the years and often would take her son on trips to Cape Cod, she said.

After learning of unusual behavior from her son and a friend of his, Guilfoyle reported O'Connell to police, she said.

An investigation eventually led to the 26 charges against O'Connell. He was ordered to spend time in the work-release program, followed by a stint in a treatment center for priests and nuns, Guilfoyle said.

At the least, O'Connell's whereabouts should have been monitored after his release, Guilfoyle contended.

"Taking aside whatever responsibilities there are, certainly are moral responsibilities," she said.

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