

Lawyer targets church sex abuse

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MARGATE — In Boston, the archdiocese turns over the names of 80 priests suspected of sexually abusing minors in the past four decades.

In Philadelphia, the archdiocese reveals it has uncovered credible allegations of sexual abuse committed by 30 of its priests in the past 50 years. Six priests who had been transferred

to administrative positions are dismissed.

The revelations have been stunning for many, but not for Stephen Rubino.

Since 1988, the Margate attorney has made a living filing civil suits against the

Roman Catholic Church. Rubino's 1994 class-action suit against the Camden Diocese is due back in court April 8.

It alleges a decadeslong cover-up of sexual abuse by church leaders and involves priests in Atlantic, Cape May and Cumberland counties.

In an interview with The Press

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**Margate's
Stephen
Rubino has
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out of
litigating
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Catholic
Church.**

Lawyer

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of Atlantic City, Rubino said the current spotlight on sexual abuse by clergy is helping the public understand the scope of the problem, but he fears the hierarchy of the Catholic Church still doesn't get it.

"There's been progress in a narrow area in that it's part of the public consciousness," Rubino said. "But for the thousands locked in litigation who are being tortured with depositions as it relates to 'Did you file your claim too late?' there is no progress at all."

The current legal battle in the Camden lawsuit revolves around statute-of-limitations issues.

In New Jersey, sexual-assault victims who recover memories of abuse have two years to file a lawsuit. Rubino said it is the church's right to fight the case on "technical" points, but they should be more concerned with the actual merit of the allegations.

"The focus should be 'Did you know this was wrong and why didn't you come forward sooner?'" Rubino said.

Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of the Camden Diocese released a statement Feb. 26 criticizing the attention currently being given to the issue of clergy abuse in the Catholic Church.

"While some in the media have used these terrible allegations as an opportunity to attack the Church, and others have attempted to inflate the matter into crisis proportions, we cannot blame the situation

on the media, overzealous attorneys or those who would seek somehow to undermine the Church," DiMarzio said.

The class-action suit against the diocese, DiMarzio said, is "not news."

"At the time it was filed, most of the claims were already between 10 and 33 years old," he said. "Several of the defendants named in the case are now deceased and most of the claims in the initial complaint have already been dismissed."

Responding to the statement, Rubino said attorneys and the media are "convenient targets."

"They've spent millions trying to keep the case out of the courts," Rubino said. "That's been their strategy. These cases are not like fine wine. They don't age well."

DiMarzio's statement included an apology for the diocese's past sins. On that same day, Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua — head of the Philadelphia Archdiocese — issued his own apology and called sexual abuse by priests "the most depraved of moral aberrations."

"Parts of the cardinal's statement are to be commended," Rubino said. "But the timing of it is at least unusual. Why now?"

The Philadelphia Archdiocese failed to release the names of the six priests it dismissed, making it impossible for authorities to investigate. A diocese spokesman said the six men are not a danger to society and they could not be prosecuted because of the time that has elapsed since their crimes.

"It's unverified information and you have to take their word for it," Rubino said. "History indicates they don't have a lot of credibility on this issue."

"Admitting wrongs is a large step, but it's not a prescription. I don't know the prescription."

Since the scandal in Boston broke, many have suggested the Catholic Church lift its vow of celibacy and allow priests to marry. A poll taken by the Boston Globe showed 74 percent of Catholics in the city reject the idea of an exclusively celibate priesthood.

Rubino said he personally feels priests should be allowed to marry, but notes that "celibacy doesn't cause pedophilia."

"The larger picture is dialogue and truthfulness," Rubino said.

A former altar boy who attended Catholic school throughout his youth, Rubino is hesitant to talk about his own faith.

"Those are my thoughts," he said. "Your faith is your faith. The hierarchy are just men. They make good decisions and bad decisions."

When Rubino first filed suit against the Camden Diocese, the bishop at the time — James E. McHugh — called it "terrorism" and labeled Rubino an extortionist.

With the apologies now rolling in for past sins, Rubino said he feels no vindication. DiMarzio's recent statement, he said, "seems to bifurcate logic."

"They're saying 'We're identifying problems now but we don't want to take care of the past,'" Rubino said. "The past has never been taken care of."