

Lawyer levels clergy abuse allegations

By MICHELLE WILLIAMS

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Nadine Tift's faith has been tested.

The 37-year-old yesterday publicly accused a priest of sexually molesting her as a teenager.

"I'm still Catholic," she said, but added, "It makes it hard to go to church."

Two decades ago, Tift and several friends attended leadership retreats organized through her church for young members. The retreats were designed to connect Catholics throughout New England with leaders in the church.

During such events, Tift alleges she was sexually abused by a former clergyman in Massachusetts, the Rev. John Sweeney, of the Franciscans of Primitive Observance, a religious community under the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston.

Sweeney would encourage the teens to confess their sins and told several they were possessed and would perform exorcisms on them, Tift said.

During a church retreat in 2000, Tift said Sweeney sexually molested her. In years since, Tift said other friends said they were sexually abused by Sweeney as well.

"We were teenagers who trusted that priest," she said.

She refrained from speaking about the incident for more than a decade, then reported the incident to investigators with the church several years ago. Promises were made, but in the end "they did nothing," Tift said.

Sweeney was assigned to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in New Bedford from 1998-2004. In years since, he was assigned to other parishes in Massachusetts, including in Lawrence and Roxbury.

The archdiocese said Sweeney is no longer a priest in the Catholic Church.

Tift's attorney, Mitchell Garabedian, yesterday released the names of seven

other priests he said have been "credibly accused" of sexually abusing minors but not publicly identified by the archdiocese: the Revs. Gerard D. Barry, Walter Casey, Richard Donahue, Charles McGahey, Arnold E. Kelley, Edward J. McLaughlin and Monsignor Charles J. Ring.

Donahue and Kelley are alive, the other five named are deceased. The archdiocese reached a five-figure settlement with a victim of Kelley, who lived in Lowell for a number of years.

Years after the clergy abuse scandal made international headlines, Garabedian said victims are still coming forward for multiple reasons, including victims needing time to process what occurred and a lack of transparency allowing for continued abuse.

Garabedian said the victims range in age from 29 to 76.

"We're spanning decades of sexual abuse," he said, adding, "The Catholic Church cannot self police when it comes to sexual abuse and this is just further evidence."

The archdiocese disputed this remark.

"The Archdiocese of Boston is committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of children and young people in our parishes and institutions," it said in a statement. "We evidence that commitment in part by following our publicly-stated protocol for handling claims of abuse, as we have in the allegations asserted in today's press conference wherein it falsely suggests that archdiocese has broken from promises."

All allegations made against clergymen were immediately reported to law enforcement when they were received, the archdiocese said, and the names of accused priests are listed according to protocol.

Five of the priests were dead at the time the church received the allegations, and so their names were not listed, per protocol.

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Archdiocese of Boston in a statement

Kelley has not been in active ministry and has been publicly disclosed, so his name is listed.

Donahue is retired and allegations against him remain under investigation, according to the archdiocese.