

More sex abuse lawsuits filed against Catholic Diocese of Portland

The suits allege that a
monsignor and a nun, who each
worked at a church in Bangor,
abused young boys decades
ago.

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A former altar boy and a former second grader filed

separate lawsuits against the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland this week alleging they were abused by a former monsignor and a former nun decades ago and have suffered emotional trauma and permanent psychological damage ever since.

Lawyers for the two filed separate lawsuits late Tuesday in Penobscot County Superior Court in Bangor. It is the first time a former nun has been named as a defendant in a sexual abuse lawsuit against the diocese, the lawyers said.

The suits allege that Monsignor Edward F. Ward abused an altar boy at St. John Church in 1966 and Sister Mary Geraldine Walsh abused a second grade student at St. John Parochial School in Bangor in 1957-58.

Both Ward and Walsh have died and the victims are in their 60s and 70s, according to the court filing. The plaintiffs' attorneys, Michael Bigos and Timothy Kenlan of the Berman & Simmons Sex Abuse Survivors' Practice

Group, held a news conference Wednesday morning in Bangor and said their clients have asked to remain anonymous.

“With the filings of both lawsuits this week we want the Catholic Diocese to know that these were completely preventable situations of abuse,” Bigos said. “Today, we intend to hold the church fully accountable for the abuse, fully accountable for the cover-up, and fully accountable for the response that our client received as a child.”

Berman & Simmons [has filed 13 lawsuits](#) against the diocese alleging sexual abuse by clergy. Bigos been involved in several of those suits, all filed after state lawmakers voted last year to remove the [statute of limitations](#) on childhood sexual abuse lawsuits.

Dave Guthro, spokesman for the diocese, did not respond directly to the lawsuits, but issued a statement from Bishop Robert Deeley addressing past instances of clergy sexual abuse.

“Diocesan and parish leaders, clergy, employees and volunteers have worked tirelessly to ensure the Church in Maine is a safe environment for our young people and all who wish to grow their faith,” Deeley said. “With the controls we have put in place and continuing vigilance, we can gratefully say that our diocese’s procedures have created a safer Church here.”

Deeley said the Maine Attorney General’s Office released a report in 2004 on its investigation of sexual abuse of minors by priests in the Portland diocese. The AG found that the diocese has not had a substantiated new allegation since 1993.

Bigos said his client, the altar boy, was sexually assaulted multiple times by Ward. The suit alleges that in one incident Ward used a small vial of holy water and began applying the liquid to the plaintiff’s body with his hands. The suit says that the school principal, a nun, inadvertently walked in on one of the assaults.

When the boy reported the abuse to his principal a few

days later, she admonished him for lying about a priest and slapped him twice across his hands, the suit contends.

The lawsuit cites nine criminal counts, including assault and battery, negligence and recklessness, sexual assault and intentional infliction of emotional distress. Bigos said his client has “suffered severe and debilitating emotional injury, pain and suffering, physical and emotional trauma and permanent psychological damage,” and asks the court to award him future costs for counseling, psychological and psychiatric medical treatment.

Ward died in 1997 at age 96.

The alleged victim in the second lawsuit, filed by Kenlan, was a second-grade student at St. John Parochial School in Bangor in the late 1950s. Walsh was employed as a nun with the Order of the Sisters of Mercy, was an eighth grade teacher and served as school principal.

The suit alleges that the plaintiff and his classmates were

routinely subjected to “corporal displays of punishment by teachers during school hours.” The students were called to the front of the classroom where teachers “instructed the children to partially doff their pants and expose their buttocks.” Teachers would then physically strike or spank the child they were disciplining.

“The plaintiff felt deep shame, embarrassment and fear as a result of the public floggings,” court documents state.

The suit says Walsh, using her authority as principal, ordered the plaintiff into a coatroom on the pretense that he had urinated in his trousers and needed to take his pants off. She sexually abused him in the coatroom several times, the suit contends.

“Plaintiff never disclosed the abuse by Walsh to anyone until he was a mature adult in his 70s out of fear of being disbelieved, shame and embarrassment,” court documents state. Walsh died in 1973 at age 86.

In the diocese's statement, Deeley said that since 2002, over 16,000 Catholic Church employees, volunteers, priests and educators who work with children in Maine, have been trained in a safe environment program. In March, an independent audit of safe environment procedures found the diocese, which includes 141 churches in Maine, was in compliance with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.

The suits are now being transferred to the Business and Consumer court docket, Bigos said.