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**Daily Herald**  
SUBURBAN CHICAGO'S INFORMATION SOURCE

St. Peter Church breaks silence Parish official discusses controversial documents

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**Date:** February 11, 2004  
**Page:** 1  
**Section:** News

St. Peter Catholic Church is no small institution. It numbers about 2,600 families. Its ministries affect thousands more.

Recently, the parish has become embroiled in a controversy over a legal precedent the Rockford Diocese is trying to set by not turning over documents related to a local priest accused of sexual abuse.

Some parishioners have rushed to defend the parish and the diocese. Some have offered criticism. Some still have questions.

But one aspect remains constant through all the differing reactions.

"Emotions run very high in this type of case," said **Rama Canney**, spokeswoman for St. Peter in Geneva.

Until Tuesday, the church had not commented publicly on the increased scrutiny it has been the focus of since a Nov. 16 letter to the Daily Herald.

But in the wake of continued news reports fueled by information from those outside the church, **Canney** offered some comments on the situation.

"We'd like to have the trial proceed and justice to be done and healing to occur for any hurts that are out there," **Canney** said. "We want that to come to a conclusion just as anyone else does."

She acknowledged that there are reasons to be focusing on St. Peter, but said the decision to withhold documents related to former priest Mark Campobello rests with the diocese, not with the church.

Campobello is accused of abusing two girls during 1999 and 2000 while he was living at St. Peter and working as an assistant principal at Aurora Central Catholic High School.

"It's very much about a parishioner of ours (who wrote the letter), it is about a priest who lived on our campus," **Canney** said. "But it is not about documents that we're not turning over."

**Canney** said that while she asked members of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests group to leave parish grounds Sunday morning, it was because of the unexpected disruption, not because anyone disagrees with their message or goals.

"We don't have an issue with them," **Canney** said. "We have a love for them. They are good people with pure intentions."

After a parishioner wrote a letter to the Daily Herald, Msgr. Joseph Jarmoluk responded during a homily in December. Some present interpreted his comments as simply explaining the situation, while others thought they bordered on hostile.

"Father Joe's intent was to clarify a bit of misinformation," **Canney** said. "Father Joe just wanted to make sure people had the best information possible so they could make their own decisions. It was

important not just to leave it out there."

**Canney** said Jarmoluk has seen a great deal of support from church members, including a 900-signature petition supporting him.

She said, on the whole, the situation has drawn parishioners closer together, although some do have problems with how it has been handled.

"The division is small, but there probably is one," **Canney** said.

In January, Jarmoluk said he would be taking a three-month sabbatical beginning Feb. 1, which had been planned since September, but later announced he would not.

**Canney** said the ongoing situation did lead to his decision to stay, although an expected subpoena to testify at Campobello's May trial did not.

"This was not the time for him to leave us," **Canney** said. "He did not feel he could take advantage of the spirit of the sabbatical."

**Canney** said she intends to meet with member of SNAP, the Chicago-based victim's advocacy group. President Barbara Blaine said she talked with **Canney** but that specifics of a meeting have not been determined.

Despite the willingness to talk, Blaine still takes issue with St. Peter not stepping up to demand the diocese release the documents. The diocese has been held in contempt of court since May 2003 for refusing to release the documents, but it has appealed a Kane County judge's rulings claiming that they constitute a violation of the Constitutional separation between church and state.

"If the parishes demand openness and transparency, there will be openness and transparency," Blaine said.

**Canney** said St. Peter remains confident the courts will sort out the legal issues and that measures in place locally will keep history from repeating itself.

"Most people think our church, although slow, is moving forward to make sure this doesn't happen again to the extent an institution can do that," **Canney** said.