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Abuse victim says policy doesn't go far enough

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ROCKFORD - A former Rockford-area resident was sexually abused by a priest who later died of complications from AIDS, and neither the U.S. bishops' historic charter nor Rockford's revised policy on sexual misconduct goes far enough for this alleged victim.

Ronald J. Zaha, 42, of Scottsdale, Ariz., said the Rev. James Gaynor repeatedly abused him from 1963 to 1965, when he was 4- and 5-years-old and Gaynor was a priest at the family's home parish, St. Rita's of Cassia, in Aurora, Ill.

When Zaha went to diocesan officials in September 2000 with his allegations, Msgr. David Kagan informed him that the priest had died of AIDS in 1991.

The accused priest was dead, and Zaha refused to sign an agreement offering money for counseling but releasing the diocese from all liabilities or damages, so the talks broke off.

Zaha, who left Illinois in 1987, contacted Kagan again in June, after reading the Register Star's account of how the diocese responded to allegations of sexual abuse by the Rev. Harlan Clapsaddle.

"It sickens me to see the lack of compassion in the Church's response to the victims," Zaha wrote in a letter addressed to Kagan. "The response I received from the diocese was wholly inadequate."

Kagan told the Register Star that the investigation into Gaynor is an open case, but with Gaynor's death and no independent corroboration of Zaha's story, it's come to a standstill.

"Church law requires us to obtain witness testimony to verify what any person alleges," Kagan said.

"It's something of a frustration investigating these cases from the 1960s and 1970s, when you can't get complete and clear information."

Zaha, who says he has been plagued by nightmares, depression, suicidal thoughts and sexual problems, said he is offended by the diocese's response to his allegations.

"I have nothing to gain by pretending that this abuse happened," he said. "No one wishes more than I that this abuse never happened however, I have gone my whole life wishing for that, but in reality, it did."

Zaha is not after financial gain, he said, just recognition from the church that what he alleges is true.

Anyone with information regarding sexual misconduct by any diocesan official is encouraged to report it to the police or the Diocese of Rockford, 815-962-9347.

Contact: ewebster@smtp.registerstar.tower.com 815-987-1394.