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Archbishop defends 1983 decision to keep priest working near children

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By Peter Smithpsmith@courier-journal.com
The Courier-Journal

As critics called for his resignation yesterday, Louisville Archbishop Thomas C. Kelly defended his decision 20 years ago to let a pastor continue working even though the priest admitted he molested a boy.

In a seven-paragraph statement released yesterday afternoon, Kelly said he kept the Rev. Thomas Creagh in parish ministry in 1983 because he believed that Creagh's molestation of Gregory C. Hall, a 15-yearold boy, was an "isolated incident" and that the priest "did not pose a danger to anyone."

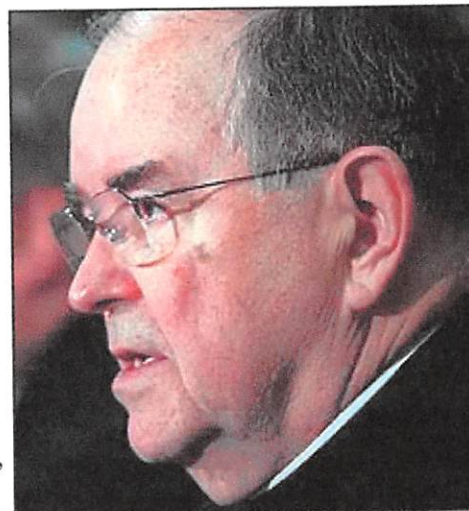
But Kelly said he wouldn't make the same decision today, "with the advantage of 20 years of knowledge about childhood sexual abuse and experience here and elsewhere. . . ."

His comments came after The Courier-Journal yesterday reported on two internal memos written by Kelly in 1983, that showed that Creagh told Kelly of the sexual abuse days after it happened and that Kelly decided to quietly keep the priest in his parish, where he had unrestricted access to children.

Two suits have been filed, including one yesterday, that accuse Creagh of sexual abuse after the 1983 incident.

Brandon M. Howard, 20, alleges that Creagh molested him between 1990 and 1997 while he attended St. Ignatius Church in Louisville, where Creagh was then pastor. In all, five people have accused Creagh of sexual abuse in lawsuits.

More than 200 people have suits pending against the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Louisville, alleging decades of sexual abuse by 34 priests, teachers and others associated with the church.



Critics of Louisville Archbishop Thomas C. Kelly launched a petition drive yesterday calling on him to resign.

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Whether their cases proceed depends in part on their lawyers' arguments that Kentucky's statute of limitations should not apply because the archdiocese knew of the abuse and covered it up. Spurred by Kelly's internal memos, about a dozen people, including four plaintiffs suing the archdiocese, held a news conference outside archdiocesan headquarters on East College Street yesterday afternoon to launch a petition drive calling for Kelly's resignation.

The petition contends Kelly "participated in the denial and cover-up within the Louisville Archdiocese and repeatedly put children in harm's way by exposing them to known abusers."

Kelly oversaw a confidential settlement in 1983 in which the archdiocese and Creagh agreed to pay the Hall family \$20,000.

The archdiocese has denied covering up abuse, and Kelly's spokeswoman, Cecelia Price, reiterated the archbishop's earlier statements that he planned to stay in office and work to resolve the abuse crisis.

Kelly's memos on the 1983 incident were among thousands of documents turned over by court order last month to more than 200 plaintiffs suing the archdiocese.

The archbishop's statement yesterday was critical of the way the memos had been released by William McMurry, a lawyer for most of those suing. Kelly said the documents, written to himself "in the heat of the moment" were being released out of context, but did not elaborate.

In the memos, Kelly wrote that he found Hall's parents and their lawyers to be "hostile and vindictive" and that they could destroy Creagh's ministry and harm the St. Albert the Great parish if they went public.

Kelly expressed regret yesterday for the pain of "the Hall family as internal memos are published in the newspaper."

"Unfortunately, what we are experiencing here is a legal battle," Kelly said. "We have consistently communicated our desire for a mediated settlement with the victim/survivors who have brought lawsuits and our wish to bring healing to victims."

One of those victims, Hall, joined about a dozen people at yesterday's news conference calling for Kelly's resignation.

"I hold him responsible" for abuse by Creagh, Hall said. "Father Creagh's a sick man. He needs to seek help."

The archdiocese yesterday would not give out contact information for Creagh. He did not reply to a request for comment made through the archdiocese.

The protesters included Michael Turner, Mary C. Miller and Tom Weiter, who also have lawsuits pending against the archdiocese. Most others identified themselves as family or friends of plaintiffs.

"I was Catholic and want to be again," said Turner, who filed the first lawsuit against the archdiocese last April.

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Bonnie Miles, who identified herself as a concerned Catholic, said she decided yesterday morning that Kelly should resign after reading his memos in The Courier-Journal.

Miles said she stopped attending Mass at the Cathedral of the Assumption, where she said she is registered, about two months ago.

"It's just too difficult for me to go, and I'm a Catholic by choice," Miles said, noting that she had converted at age 18.

Susan Archibald, president of The Linkup, a Louisville-based support group for survivors of clergy abuse, said she hopes thousands of people, including priests, will sign the petition.

She said the petition will be delivered to Kelly within a month. She said Catholics contacted her yesterday morning asking how they could get forms and take them to their parishes.

Archibald said the memos dispel the church's statements that it always tried to do the right thing in response to abuse.

McMurry, the attorney representing Brandon Howard, said the plaintiff could have been spared seven years of alleged abuse if Kelly had removed Creagh in 1983.

McMurry declined to provide contact information for Howard yesterday, saying it was not in his interest to be interviewed because he is suffering psychologically from the abuse. The lawyer said Howard broke off contact with Creagh when he was about 14.

In addition to Howard's suit, one filed by Michael Sheehan last year accused Creagh of abusing him at age 17 in December 1983 -- nine months after Kelly decided to keep the priest in ministry.

Creagh continued to lead parishes until last May when he resigned from Holy Family Church after Hall sued. Kelly removed Creagh from ministry in July, enforcing a stricter policy adopted by U.S. Catholic bishops that bars any priest who sexually abuses a minor even once.

He served most of his career in Louisville but served three years as a missionary to Alaska in the early 1970s and also worked from 1985 to 1987 in the Diocese of Venice, Fla., before returning to Louisville.

The newly released files on Creagh imply that Kelly informed Bishop John J. Nevins of Venice, Fla., about Creagh's background.

A July 15, 1985, letter from Nevins to Kelly cites the discussions among U.S. Catholic bishops about sexual abuse by priests. That year, bishops had received a major report warning them to deal seriously with the issue.

Nevins asked Kelly if he had any evidence that Creagh had received medical or psychological treatment.

"It would benefit us to have supporting evidence regarding the emotional health of any priest who has been charged or accused of immoral actions," Nevins wrote. ". . . If any person(s)

should be vindictive enough and plan to cause a priest more heartaches, we would be ready to come to his defense and support him in every way."

The files do not include Kelly's reply. The only psychological evaluation of Creagh in the files, conducted in 1986 by the House of Affirmation therapeutic center in Florida, stated that Creagh was fit for ministry but made no mention of sexual issues.

Venice diocesan spokeswoman Gail McGrath said yesterday that no one has brought allegations against Creagh in Florida.

After Creagh was publicly accused last May, she said, the diocese posted notices in the two parishes where he served, encouraging anyone who had been abused to report to police, state child-protective services or the diocese.

McGrath said she could not comment on personnel files.

Staff writer Gregory A. Hall contributed to this story.

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