

Priests Accused of Sex Abuse Hiding in Plain Sight

Norberto Nierras says he saw the man with the shock of white hair all the time along Home Avenue, a residential block that teems with children from the Catholic elementary and high schools a few hundred yards away.

The man, Nierras said, came and went as he pleased, strolling the Rutherford neighborhood or sitting on a bench outside the four-story building he called home: the St. John Vianney Residence for Retired Priests.

What Nierras didn't know is that the man, Monsignor Peter Cheplic, had been accused of drugging and molesting four teenage boys in the 1970s and 1980s. Or that the Archdiocese of Newark found the claims credible enough to remove him from ministry in 2006.

Cheplic, who has denied the allegations, is one of at least seven alleged sexual predators quietly placed in the Rutherford retirement home in the past 15 years, *The Star-Ledger* found. Some lived there a short time. Others have stayed for years. Neighbors said they were never informed of the men's presence until told by a reporter.

"Parents need to be made aware of this," said Nierras, 25, who has lived across the street from St. John Vianney for more than three years. "There are kids around this area constantly. I'm pretty sure people would be upset. I'm upset."

Eleven years after the nation's bishops confronted the clergy sex abuse crisis, vowing at a landmark summit in Dallas to make the protection of children a priority and to open a new era of transparency, the church continues to wrestle with a host of vexing questions and competing interests.

Does a credibly accused priest's privacy trump public safety? Is the church capable of supervising alleged abusers? Should such priests even remain under the church's care, drawing a salary, room and board?

All of those questions apply to people like Cheplic, who was barred from public ministry but not criminally prosecuted because, by the time his accusers came forward, the deadline to charge him had expired under the statute of limitations. Across New Jersey's five dioceses, dozens of priests are believed to be in the same sort of limbo.

They include diocesan priests and clerics of religious orders, such as the Christian Brothers and the Benedictines. And they include priests who were barred from ministry in other states and have moved to or returned to New Jersey.

Precisely how many others there are – and where most of them live – remains unclear, because the state's bishops, by and large, refuse to discuss the matter publicly.

The issues of supervision and transparency have taken on a renewed urgency in New Jersey this year after a series of revelations by The Star-Ledger about the Rev. Michael Fugee and other priests.

Fugee, 52, was criminally charged in May after the newspaper disclosed he attended youth retreats and heard confessions from minors in violation of a court-sanctioned agreement to stay away from children. He has since been released on bail.

Newark Archbishop John J. Myers and his spokesman, Jim Goodness, would not comment for this story, declining to say whether other accused priests lived in the Rutherford residence or in a second retirement home for priests in Caldwell.

The Star-Ledger found that at least two accused clerics lived in Caldwell, address records show. That facility, too, is next

to a Catholic elementary school, Trinity Academy, on the grounds of St. Aloysius Parish.

A monitoring system with limitations

The newspaper posed more than a dozen questions about supervision and transparency to New Jersey's bishops. Paterson Bishop Arthur Serratelli declined to comment. A spokesman for Camden Bishop Dennis Sullivan referred the newspaper to its website.

Spokeswomen for Trenton Bishop David M. O'Connell and Metuchen Bishop Paul Bootkoski issued statements that did not address the number of priests under supervision or where they are housed.

O'Connell's spokeswoman, Rayanne Bennett, said the diocese immediately notifies law enforcement of abuse allegations and alerts pastors and the public to suspensions. The diocese also works to ensure that suspended priests do not have access to parish or school communities, Bennett said.

"The diocese makes every reasonable effort to maintain contact with the priest and exercise ongoing oversight," she said. "However, the diocese has no legal power to control the individual's place of residence or daily activities beyond the context of ministry."

Bootkoski's spokeswoman, Erin Friedlander, said the diocese "continues to seek out best practices for monitoring priests removed from ministry."

While Goodness would not discuss the issue, he did provide some information about supervision in an email sent last month to pastors and administrators of Catholic schools to alert them this story was in progress.

Goodness wrote that 15 priests are currently under supervision and that four others whom Myers removed from ministry since

2001 have died.

The surviving priests must submit “periodic” written reports of their activities to the archdiocese. In recent years, Goodness wrote, the program has been expanded to include regular phone contact between the alleged abusers and the archdiocese’s minister for priests.

But clearly, the system has limitations, as Fugee demonstrated by openly spending time with members of the youth group at St. Mary’s Parish in Colts Neck. The church’s pastor, two youth ministers and the archdiocese’s vicar general, or second in command to Myers, have since been removed.

In July, *The Star-Ledger* disclosed that the archdiocese allowed the Rev. Robert Chabak to live at an Oradell parish for several months after Hurricane Sandy damaged his Ocean County home.

Neither the archdiocese nor the pastor informed parishioners of his background. Chabak was removed from ministry in 2004 for allegedly molesting a boy during a three-year span.

When a few members of the parish raised an outcry, Chabak was transferred to the retirement home in Rutherford. He has since moved back to his private residence.

O’Connell, the Trenton bishop, also came under fire last month after it was revealed that for more than a year, he declined to tell a parish in Jackson why an assistant pastor, the Rev. Matthew Riedlinger, had been pulled from the church.

The bishop did so only after he learned *The Star-Ledger* was preparing a story about Riedlinger, who had been accused of sexually harassing several young men and engaging in explicit sexual conversations with someone he thought to be a 16-year-old boy. After the story ran, O’Connell suspended Riedlinger from ministry.

Looking for a solution

Observers from inside and outside the priesthood say the church has made enormous improvements in child safety since the 2002 summit in Dallas. An annual audit conducted on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops found that in 2012, allegations against priests had dropped to their lowest level since data collection began in 2004.

At the same time, the observers say the incidents in New Jersey, along with others across the country, show that some bishops continue to operate too secretively and, as a result, put children at risk.

“Even though they pledged to be transparent in Dallas, here we are in 2013 and they’re not being forthright about who their offenders are,” said canon lawyer Patrick Wall, a former priest and Benedictine monk who now works for a Minnesota law firm that frequently sues the church over abuse allegations.

“The bishops have chosen to say the right words, but they have not followed through with their actions,” Wall said. “Until the day that cardinals and archbishops start going to jail, nothing is fundamentally going to change in the United States.”

The Rev. Thomas Reese, a senior analyst for the National Catholic Reporter and the former editor of America, a Catholic magazine, said it is “nonsense” to believe pastors, already overworked, can properly supervise priests who have been credibly accused of abuse.

“He can’t act like a probation officer for another priest,” Reese said. “He has neither the training nor the time.”

The conflict is exacerbated if pastor and priest are friends, Reese said.

“If you’re friends with the alleged criminal, you’re in

denial, just like any family is," he said.

In general, Reese is not wholly unsympathetic to the church's position, particularly when it is confronted with elderly or ailing priests who committed abuses decades before.

"Sometimes there are extenuating circumstances," Reese said. "If you've got a guy who did this 30 years ago and now he's in a rest home with Alzheimer's disease, are you going to take away his pension and wheel him to the sidewalk? This is complicated stuff."

Some bishops move immediately to laicize credibly accused clergy members, or kick them out of the priesthood altogether, Reese said.

But that response, too, has drawn little consensus because of the obvious danger: potential predators released into communities, typically with no supervision at all.

"What we've learned is that this is not a sin or a disease that can be treated," said Wall. "This is a true psychic infirmity, and the only way to treat it is to remove them from their target population."

Wall suggests bishops return to a tactic the church used for centuries to keep predatory priests bottled up: isolating them in monasteries for a "life of prayer and penance." Hundreds of such monasteries exist across the country, he said.