

StarTribune.com | MINNEAPOLIS - ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

Last update: September 15, 2006 – 6:17 PM

Delay in sex-abuse case sparks protests

A dispute about the public naming of an alleged abuser underlines differences between the Catholic hierarchy and victims' advocates in handling clergy sex-abuse cases.

Pamela Miller, Star Tribune

Patrick Marker was fed up.

Marker, 41, of Mount Vernon, Wash., had spent three years that he described as "intensely frustrating" on a board monitoring sex-abuse cases involving monks at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn. Last month, he quit the board, which was created in 2002 as part of a settlement of several abuse cases. He blamed "inexcusable" delays in publicizing abusers' names.

For Marker, the case of the Rev. Michael Bik, who was accused nine years ago but whose name wasn't released until this summer, was "the last straw."

The Bik case dramatically underscores disagreements between the Catholic hierarchy and activists about how and when the names of alleged abusers should be publicized, a process activists see as crucial to locating victims and alerting potential ones. In addition to Marker's protest, the case inspired SNAP (Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests) to pass out leaflets at Twin Cities churches the past three Sundays.

Bik, 57, is one of three St. John's clerics whose names were released in July because of what Abbot John Klassen deemed credible allegations. Bik, who is both a monk and priest, lives at the Benedictine abbey under travel and social restrictions, abbey officials say, as does the second named priest, the Rev. Bruce Wollmering. The third, the Rev. Robert Blumeyer, died in 1983.

Bik is accused of having had sexual contact in the 1970s with two teenagers when he was a teacher at two parishes in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, before his ordination and arrival at St. John's. The archdiocese and abbey learned of the allegations in 1997, but Bik was allowed to continue teaching at St. John's Preparatory School and St. John's University for five years before being placed on restrictions in 2002.

Marker, a 1983 abuse victim, and other activists say that as soon as the allegations were deemed credible, Bik should have been removed from teaching and his name should have been publicized.

"Some steps have been taken to make the abbey safer and to notify potential victims," Marker said. "But in general, the external review board has turned into an internal advisory board and serves as a PR tool for the abbey."

Archdiocese, abbey respond

When first asked about the Bik case by a St. Paul Pioneer Press reporter, archdiocese spokesman Dennis McGrath denied that the archdiocese knew of it before this summer. The next day, he said that a file about it had been unearthed.

"There was no intent to hide anything," he said. "When asked about it, we searched the files and found nothing, but a subsequent search turned up the file."

As for the argument that Bik's name should have been released long ago, McGrath said the archdiocese acted properly given that Bik "wasn't a priest in our jurisdiction, but a Benedictine teacher."

In 1998, an "adult male victim" went to Archbishop Harry Flynn with "a very credible claim" of having been abused by Bik while a pupil at St. Stephen's School in Anoka, McGrath said. Flynn informed St. John's of the accusation and "made sure the victim got counseling," McGrath said. "The victim had asked for confidentiality, and the archbishop honored that request."

Abbey spokesman the Rev. William Skudlarek said that Klassen, who became abbot in 2000, now believes that the abbey should have released Bik's name before this summer. But there are several reasons he didn't do so, Skudlarek said.

"These incidents happened well before [Bik] came to St. John's, before he was a monk or priest, and there is no evidence that he has reoffended," he said. "When he came here, he went through all the screening. The decision was made that this was in his past."

Abbey officials have undergone "a sea change in thinking" in the past few years in the wake of lawsuits and widespread publicity about clergy sexual abuse, Skudlarek said.

"It's become clear that part of the problem in the church and society at large has been the attempt to maintain confidentiality," he said. "We now recognize that in general, the names need to be made public for the sake of other victims and potential victims."

"Nothing has changed ... "

David Clohessy, SNAP's national director, traveled to the Twin Cities from St. Louis to join the first leafletting session because "this case shows that nothing has changed in terms of church secrecy," he said. "They're still not putting children's safety first."

Clohessy argues that all allegations should be handled by law enforcement, not church officials. "We don't let schools handle cases of abusive teachers," he said. "Why do we let the church do it?"

Minnesota SNAP director Bob Schwiderski led the leafletting sessions, including two at parishes where Bik taught, St. Stephen's in Anoka and St. Odilia's in Shoreview.

The Bik case exposes several holes in the accountability net, Schwiderski said. For instance, the U.S. Catholic bishops' 2002 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, designed to prevent and address abuse, does not apply to priests and monks from religious orders. But the archdiocese "had a responsibility to go to the places where this man taught and talk about what happened as soon as it knew," he said.

McGrath said that Flynn, who by all accounts was key in shaping the 2002 charter, has been proactive against abuse in his jurisdiction. "We have named and removed every priest where there's been a credible abuse allegation," he said.

Meanwhile, Marker has revived the website (www.behindthepinecurtain.com) that he shut down during his time on the board. Skudlarek declined to comment on the site except to say that the abbey has "some problems" with it.

Schwiderski said Klassen has offered to talk to him about the Bik case, and he will do so soon. "Yes, we've seen some progress," he said. "But we have a long way to go."

Pamela Miller • 612-673-4290 • pmiller@startribune.com

©2006 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.