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Priests, bishops and canon lawyers agree: some accused priests are treated unfairly

The AUSCP offers a hand of friendship -- and a wallet card listing priests' rights

What happens when a priest is accused of something? There's no doubt that victims must be protected and that crimes must be reported. But what happens to a priest when there is uncertainty about an allegation or a protracted time for investigation? What happens to the priest who is suspended from ministry in a cloud of uncertainty?

The Mutual Support Committee of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests has prepared a document delineating the rights of priests, to be mailed to every priest, diocesan and religious, in the United States. The document was prepared with the input of several canonists, bishops, and members of the AUSCP Leadership Team. Along with it is a wallet card summarizing the rights of a priest as defined by Canon Law.

“While acknowledging the responsibility of priests to assist their bishop in determining the truth of an accusation, there are some things an accused priest needs to do as an investigation begins,” the card states. Among the things to do, a priest who receives an unexpected and unexplained call to come in to the chancery, is advised to “take a trusted priest friend with you.”

The letter is being mailed to more than 30,000 priests listed in the Kenedy Directory. “You probably know of one or another priest who has been accused of sexual abuse, perhaps even yourself,” the document begins. “The Association of U.S. Catholic Priests (AUSCP) is aware of such situations among its members and beyond. Some have been accused but exonerated. Others have been accused and convicted. Many others have been accused but ill-defined and protracted civil and ecclesial investigations leave them hanging for months and years. Some are never convicted or exonerated.”

Father Mike Sullivan knows more than one or another priests in the circumstances described. He is one of the founders of Justice for Priests and Deacons, an organization active since 1997.

“The biggest issue I have experienced is that the alleged perpetrator is presumed guilty and must prove his innocence,” said Sullivan in an email response to questions about his activity. It appears normal, he says, for a diocese to release the name of the priest before the police have finished their investigation.

“Even when the allegation is proven to be unfounded or even not possible, the priest is removed from ministry for months or even years,” and the priest’s reputation is destroyed, Sullivan said. “It is nearly impossible for a priest to become active once again. They end up retiring and usually never celebrating Mass in public again.”

Sullivan cited three cases separately involving finances, the medical needs of a priest, and allegations of sexual abuse. Two of the three were able to continue ministry. One was not.

“Father L from the northwest” was investigated for parish financial matters in 2009. Even though nothing was found to be out of order, Sullivan said the priest “was being removed so a new pastor might raise more money. “A civil attorney helped settle matters; the priest has since retired and now works filling in for other priests.”

A priest from the south received notice in the early 2010s that he was being moved despite the fact that his term of office had not expired and he was being moved many miles away from his doctors, Sullivan said. “We appealed to Rome and Rome upheld his tenure at the original parish and added that he could not be moved to a parish more than a specific number of miles from his doctors.” The priest remains active today.

A priest from the southwest received notice of an alleged incident from 2008 of improper sexual conduct. “Police determined the alleged victim was not credible and there was no evidence to support the allegation,” Sullivan said. Then, regarding a second allegation, “I was given dates in which the alleged incident occurred. When we proved it could not have happened then the investigator changed dates repeatedly yet we proved every date was wrong.” Even so, the bishop found the allegation credible and removed the priest, who subsequently left ministry.”

Sullivan says, “In all three cases I encouraged these priests to contact their friends for support.” Sullivan is a pastor in the Diocese of Minneapolis-St. Paul and a canon lawyer. He is a member of the AUSCP Mutual Support Working Group, chaired by Father Ed Palumbos.

The letters and cards are being prepared for mailing within the next several weeks.

For comment or more information

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Text of card and letter on website: <https://auscp.org/the-rights-of-priests/>