

THE PLIGHT OF FALSELY ACCUSED PRIESTS

In 1987, Raymond Donovan, former Secretary of Labor under President Ronald Reagan, was acquitted of charges that he conspired with the mafia for a business transaction. When he walked out of court a free man, he was asked by the media how he felt. He famously quipped, “Which office do I go to get my reputation back?”

The same question is being asked by falsely accused priests, though they don’t garner much attention from the media. Ask yourself this: How many times have you seen an exonerated priest interviewed on TV?

Everyone knows when charges are made against a priest—it’s all over the news—but aside from a few stories about priests whose case has been tossed, there isn’t much interest in detailing what these men have gone through. It’s sexy to report accusations; it’s unattractive to report acquittals.

The following is a list of priests in the first quarter of 2020 whose case was either found to be unsubstantiated by a church review panel or was thrown out by the courts.

- A Valley County, Nebraska jury found Fr. John Kakkuzhiyil not guilty of first-degree sexual assault. He was accused of forcible sexual assault of a woman in 2018. [“Priest Cleared of Sexual Assault,” www.theindependent.com, January 9]
- Two Buffalo priests, Monsignor Peter J. Popadick and Fr. Paul M. Nogaro, were returned to ministry after the Diocese of Buffalo was unable to substantiate allegations of child sexual abuse against them. The accuser refused to cooperate with the diocese. [“2 Buffalo Diocese Priests Accused of Sex Abuse Returned to Ministry,” *Buffalo News*, January 18]
- Another Buffalo priest, Fr. Roy T. Herberger, sued his

accuser for lying about charges of sexual abuse against him (the accuser is suing the diocese but not the priest); the priest is charging him with slander. The alleged offense took place in the 1980s and no charges were made until 2018. The accuser said he was a student at St. Ann School in the mid-1980s, but there is no record he ever attended the school. Herberger said "there is no proof, no evidence, not even an inkling, just an accusation and all of a sudden, people like me are put on the front page of papers, picture, name on television, and I mean, that's just not fair." ["Priest Files Defamation Suit Against His Accuser," *Buffalo News*, January 23]

- A Kentucky priest, Fr. David Glockner, was accused of inappropriately touching two teenage girls, and had the charges dropped both by an independent investigation by his religious order and a grand jury. ["Northern Kentucky Catholic Priest Cleared of any Wrongdoing," www.cincinnati.com, February 5]

- Fr. Paul Angelicchio was reinstated by the Diocese of Syracuse after it was determined that charges of sexually abusing a boy in the early 1980s could not be substantiated. The accuser refused to cooperate with the diocese. ["Accused Priest Reinstated by the Diocese," *Post-Standard*, February 6]

- In September, 2019, a Wisconsin judge dismissed one of six counts of sexual misconduct against Fr. William A. Nolan, and the jury found him not guilty of the remaining counts. But the Diocese of Madison commenced its own investigation of him and in March, 2020 it deemed all allegations against him not credible. ["Priest Accused of Sex Abuse Cleared by Madison Diocese," www.gazettextra.com, March 7]

- Fr. Hugh Lang, former schools superintendent of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, had his conviction of February 6 tossed when an Allegheny County judge agreed with a post-sentencing motion filed by his attorney. The initial judge, who was removed from the bench over alleged racist remarks, was found to have erred when he allowed spurious evidence to be used against the priest. ["Ex-Pittsburgh Priest Accused of Sexually Abusing

Child Has Conviction Tossed," www.triblive.com, March 9]

- An independent investigation of an Augustinian priest from Andover, Massachusetts, Fr. Peter Gori, found charges of sexual abuse from 30 years ago to be unsubstantiated. The accuser could not recall details of what happened, and his account was at variance with facts about the priest's assignment history. The attorney for the accused is Mitchell Garabedian of "Spotlight" fame; he has had previous cases against priests thrown out. ["Andover Priest Reinstated After Sexual Abuse Investigation," www.bostonglobe.com, March 30]

Then there is the case of Fr. John Onderko from Illinois. The 83-year-old priest was removed from ministry by the Diocese of Peoria for alleged sexual abuse dating back decades ago. He says he was never told of the accusations, which he denies. He has sued the diocese saying he was denied due process. ["Accused Priest in Rock Island Sues Peoria Diocese," <https://qctimes.com>, March 10]

As Ray Donovan put it, how do these priests get their reputation back?