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Retired Catholic bishop who served in Collier named in sex abuse suit

By LIAM DILLON

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A retired Catholic bishop who served in Collier County from 2004 until April 2007 is accused in a lawsuit filed in Sarasota Circuit Court of repeatedly sexually assaulting a 42-year-old Cuban man.

The lawsuit has prompted questions from a local Catholic organization about the Catholic hierarchy's handling of the retired bishop while he served in Southwest Florida.

The diocese serving Southwest Florida recently responded to the lawsuit, which was filed in August, by denying the allegations and asking for dismissal of the complaint.

The suit alleges the Most Rev. Priamo Tejada, a retired bishop of the Diocese of Baní in the Dominican Republic, began assaulting the man while Tejada was an active bishop and continued the assaults over an 11-year period, most recently in Broward County in 2005. The suit doesn't say that any of the alleged assaults took place in Southwest Florida.

The plaintiff in the lawsuit is identified by only his initials: "J.G."

In the suit, J.G. alleges Tejada contacted him in Miami in January 2005 to discuss employment opportunities within the Diocese of Venice, which has jurisdiction over 10 counties in Florida, including Collier and Lee.

After Tejada arrived in Miami, he drove J.G. to an apartment and then Tejada forced himself sexually on J.G., the suit states.

"He was threatening him with deportation or arrest," said J.G.'s lawyer, Ronald Weil of Miami.

He said J.G. plans to file a report with the Broward County Sheriff's Office about the incident.

Tejada's attorney, George Ollinger of Melbourne, has filed a motion to dismiss the suit, contending the Sarasota court doesn't have jurisdiction and the time period to file a case concerning the allegations, called the statute of limitations, has expired.

Neither Tejada nor Ollinger could be reached for comment.

The Diocese of Venice, where Tejada served after his retirement in 1997, is also named in the suit as being negligent and liable for Tejada's activities.

The suit alleges the diocese is a "breeding and dumping ground" for priests with "aberrant sexual activities" and names five other priests who the suit contends are associated with Tejada and have been relocated to the diocese after sexual misconduct accusations.

The diocese's attorney, Fred Higham of St. Petersburg, called those allegations made in the complaint "categorically untrue."

"In my opinion, they're put in there to grab headlines," he said.

Higham also filed a motion to dismiss the case, arguing there is no connection between Tejada's alleged sexual assaults and his employment with the diocese.

"My position is that the diocese had no knowledge of any sexual assault, nor any propensity of sexual assault," Higham said.

The suit has been sealed pending a judge's ruling on a confidentiality motion.

Tejada assisted at St. Peter the Apostle parish in East Naples from Sept. 27, 2004, until April 3, 2007, according to Diocese of Venice spokeswoman Adela Gonzales White.

The diocese learned of the allegations against Tejada on April 2 and withdrew his faculties, or ministerial licences, the next day, Gonzales White said in an e-mail.

Prior to his appointment to St. Peter, Tejada assisted at a parish in Clewiston and served with the migrant mission and HIV program in the diocese. According to the Vatican's Web site, Tejada had an audience with the pope as recently as 1999.

While he was serving in the diocese, records show Tejada was involved in a suspicious incident investigated by the City of Venice police department in July 2000. In a police interview, Tejada acknowledged that he was homosexual and had made unwanted sexual advances toward a then- 43-year-old male physician from the Dominican Republic who was living with Tejada in church-owned housing, the police report states.

Tejada also admitted he provided the physician with false immigration documentation and was in possession of \$2,150 owned by the physician, the report states.

A diocesan attorney and a high-ranking church legal official, Monsignor Robert Cannon, were notified of the investigation, the report states.

No charges were filed against Tejada as a result of the Venice police investigation.

The diocese responded to questions about whether it had concerns about Tejada's statements in the police report with a written statement.

"The Diocese of Venice complies with all obligations of civil and canon law," the statement reads. "When the allegation of a sexual assault by Most Rev. Priamo Tajeda (sic) was received by the Diocese last April, Bishop Tejada's faculties were immediately withdrawn. The allegation is now under investigation. The 2000 Venice police report, a public record, did not contain the allegation of a sexual assault and further, no charges were ever filed. The Diocese of Venice is committed to the well-being of those who are served by the Church, and we make every reasonable effort to prevent sexual abuse, and to respond promptly to all allegations of abuse."

The statement bolded and italicized the words "sexual assault" both times they were used. The diocese did not respond directly to an e-mail question from the Naples Daily News asking if anyone at St. Peter the Apostle parish was made aware of the report prior to Tejada's transfer there in 2004.

The diocese's statement didn't satisfy Peg Clark, president of the Southwest Florida chapter of Voice of the Faithful. The national Catholic organization, formed in response to the church's sex abuse problems, advocates increased lay involvement in church governance.

"I'm totally indignant and frustrated by another issue and another priest having a history of deviant behavior in our diocese," Clark said. "If I admitted all this to the police, wouldn't that be considered a cry for help? It seemingly has gone unmet by his bishop."

“If (officials at St. Peter’s) were not told about the report, it was absolutely a failure of transparency and accountability,” she added.

In recent years, the diocese has faced criticism for its handling of sexual abuse allegations against priests, including William Romero, a former priest and teacher at St. Ann parish in Naples who was the subject of at least five sexual abuse lawsuits.

This is the first known suit against the diocese relating to sex abuse since Bishop Frank Dewane was installed in July 2006. In 2003, then-Bishop John Nevins wrote in the diocesan newspaper that the diocese had spent \$1.6 million to resolve sex abuse allegations.

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