

Former St. Ann priest accused of sex abuse leaves the clergy

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A retired St. Ann Catholic School priest accused of sexually abusing former students has left the clergy — but continues to host foreign high school students at his LaBelle home.

William Romero, 66, has been under investigation by the Diocese of Venice for nearly one year, accused of using church rituals to molest male and female students in the St. Ann rectory a generation ago.

Earlier this month, the diocese quietly announced Romero's departure from the priesthood in its pastoral bulletin. The one-paragraph notice — which makes no mention of the sexual misconduct inquiry — stated that Romero had "petitioned Rome for dispensation from all obligations connected with the priesthood." His request was granted.

Diocese spokeswoman Gail McGrath declined further comment, and would not specify whether Romero was forcibly removed from the clergy, requested to resign or voluntarily gave up his position — which included a church pension. Romero did not respond to e-mail and telephone messages seeking comment.

After retiring from the active ministry a decade ago to rural Hendry County east of Fort Myers, Romero became a host parent and regional coordinator with a California-based student exchange program in 1998. As many as seven international students, primarily from Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries, lived with Romero until Pacific Intercultural Exchange removed two Vietnamese boys, ages 17 and 18, once the organization learned of the diocese's investigation in May 2002.

In a telephone call to Romero's home Thursday night, a young man who answered the phone said Romero was "at the high school." That turned out to be LaBelle High School, where Romero was attending an induction ceremony for a math honor society with one of his new exchange students, the school principal acknowledged Friday.

"I've asked him to keep a distance from the school," said Paul Puletti, the

LaBelle principal. "If he does have any business with the school, it is supervised and monitored. ... He's never alone with any students (at the school)."

Asked why school leaders would allow the continued participation of a man accused of sexually abusing teenagers who only a year ago was disciplined for improper involvement with an exchange program, Puletti replied that the unidentified student or students "had valid visas." He referred further questions to Hendry County School Superintendent Tom Conner, who could not be reached for comment late Friday.

Also unclear is whether Romero continues to work for Pacific Intercultural Exchange or if he's involved with another exchange program. A regional supervisor in Pensacola referred calls to PIE's San Diego office. The agency's executive director was traveling cross-country Friday and could not be reached for comment.

News of Romero's continued involvement with young people in Southwest Florida came as a shock to Marty Elliott, a Bonita Springs woman who says her then-13-year-old daughter was sexually assaulted by Romero during the 1975-76 school year at St. Ann's, a storied parish in Old Naples. Romero, then 38, led the church's youth group and taught catechism at its school.

"It's just incredible. It's sickening," she said. "It is very, very disappointing."

After alerting Romero's superior about the multiple incidents, church leaders tried to buy the family's silence by offering Elliott's daughter free tuition at Barry University, a Catholic school in Miami, Elliott said. They refused.

In previous interviews with the Daily News, Elliott's adult daughter and several other former St. Ann's students offered detailed accounts of Romero's behavior away from the pews, including a ritual in which the priest would force boys and girls to undress in his rectory bedroom, praying to God while dedicating their bodies to Father Romero.

While with the exchange program, Romero not only worked as a host parent but also was a volunteer area representative, interviewing prospective parents in their homes to assess their fitness for duty. According to two people previously affiliated with the PIE program in Hendry County, Romero was given the supervisory role even after Diocese of Venice officials alerted the organization that church law forbade priests — active or retired — from living with unrelated minors.

Suzy Conner, a Highlands County woman who, along with her husband, was interviewed by Romero as potential PIE hosts, said the former priest — who called himself Willie and made no mention of his past occupation — described showing one high school student how to use toilet paper, presumably because the young man came from a culture with primitive sanitary practices. So the retired priest said he put his hands between the youth's legs, Conner said.

In another instance, Romero said he demonstrated the proper way to bathe by joining the teenager in the shower, Conner said.

In an interview in his home last year, Romero called the sex abuse charges "malicious, slanderous lies." He said he left St. Ann's after the father of a 12-year-old boy accused him of molesting the man's son, which he denied. Romero also acknowledged being sent to a Rhode Island treatment center specializing in sexual disorders among clergy members one year after arriving at St. Ann's. Doctors there gave him a clean bill of health, he said.

Despite the apparent conclusion of the Diocese of Venice inquiry, Romero is not completely in the clear. Ted Zelman, a Naples attorney representing a former St. Ann's student who has charged Romero with abuse, said he plans to soon file a civil lawsuit against the ex-priest.

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