

# Diocese verifies abuse allegation

Lake Highlands: Monsignor ousted over sexual misconduct

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By **BROOKS EGERTON / The Dallas Morning News**

Dallas Diocese officials say they have verified a sexual-misconduct allegation against a prominent priest and have permanently barred him from ministry.

Monsignor Richard E. Johnson was suspended from St. Patrick Church in late May, when he was accused of abusing an altar boy for several years in the 1980s.

Monsignor Johnson, who led the large Lake Highlands parish for about 20 years, could not be found for comment Monday. He is at least the 15th Dallas priest to be removed from ministry after being accused of misconduct with minors.

The accuser, a Dallas man now in his 30s, said the priest abused him without signs of remorse.

"He would say, 'There's nothing wrong with two people loving each other,' " the man said.

The abuse occurred primarily in the rectory at St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a White Rock-area parish where Monsignor Johnson worked before being assigned to St. Patrick, said the accuser. It included drinking alcohol, kissing, fondling and oral sex, he said.

The man described himself as a "cradle Catholic" who was too ashamed for many years to speak up. He said he came forward only after depression and anxiety led to panic attacks, seizures and intensive therapy.

"I buried this," he said. "My body was screaming out for help."

Monsignor Johnson once made him feel special but ended up crushing his faith, said the man, who is married and has young children.

"The very people who are entrusted with the keys to salvation ultimately can cause somebody to turn away from Christianity," he said. "Today I get creeped out when I drive in front of a Catholic church."

James "Clint" Beakey Jr., president of the St. Patrick Parish council, said he knew little about the case against Monsignor Johnson and was "deeply saddened" by it.

"I'll continue to keep Monsignor Johnson and the victim in my prayers," he said.

Diocese officials told parishioners Sunday, without explanation, that they had verified the allegation against the priest. The officials did not answer Monday when a reporter asked whether the 76-year-old cleric had admitted misconduct and whether he faced other allegations.

Dallas lawyer Tahira Khan Merritt, who represents Monsignor Johnson's one known accuser, said her client has not spoken to a diocesan review board investigating the matter or made any financial demands.

Ms. Merritt, who has represented numerous abuse victims in lawsuits, said church officials apparently moved quickly to suspend the priest after learning, from an unidentified third party, that she was investigating him.

She said her client's case is probably too old for criminal prosecution. The man said he would cooperate with authorities if more recent cases emerged, though "I have really struggled with what is justice here. There really is no justice."

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