

Archbishop promises new look at screening of would-be priests

The Edmonton Journal

29 June 1989

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Catholic parishioners poured out their anguish for their priests and children Wednesday as Edmonton's Catholic archbishop promised to review how men are screened for the priesthood.

Many say recent sexual assault charges laid against Alberta priests have attracted too much publicity, but agree the problem must be examined.

"Naturally the church should look into this," said an 80-year-old Catholic leaving morning mass at an Edmonton church. "It has shaken the church but let's not forget they're human."

Archbishop Joseph MacNeil said he would review the selection process of accepting future priests and current preventative programs but called on Catholics for guidance on what forum a larger inquiry should take.

"At this moment I understand we must look at how we screen prospects for the seminary and our training programs in light of what's happened," he said.

MacNeil, president of the Alberta Conference of Catholic Bishops, says he has no authority to launch an inquiry into the incidents surrounding the arrests of two St. Paul-diocese priests for sexual assault charges involving children.

He said the issue of pedophilia has been discussed for years in the priesthood. "It's important that people don't think we have our heads in the sand."

MacNeil was shaken to learn that a former Edmonton priest, Rev. Angus McRae, convicted of buggery here in 1980, was charged Monday with sexually molesting two Toronto boys. "I feel terrible. It's something we must look at," he said.

McRae was sent to a Toronto centre for six months rehabilitation by MacNeil following a term of imprisonment. After receiving a report from Toronto, the archbishop later agreed McRae could return to a parish if he was supervised.

But police were not involved in a second Edmonton case handled by MacNeil eight years ago.

MacNeil said he removed another priest, on loan to the Edmonton diocese for three years, but the families preferred not to lay charges.

MacNeil did not know whether the priest has returned to a parish but said the priest is no longer in Alberta and would not be accepted back.

Like McRae, the priest received professional help at Southdown House near Toronto and the local Catholic Social Services counselled the families.

Today he would involve the police even though he believes that can be a delicate issue.

"Now I would be obliged to go to the authorities if it happened," he said. "I have a little fear that if we keep insisting that as soon we know we'll go to the law, it may scare people. We have to abide by the law, but my biggest concern is that it stops."