

Molesting priest to serve 18 months' house arrest

Victims say crimes merited jail, upset by inaction on part of church leaders

By Donna-Marie Sonnichsen
Staff Reporter

A Roman Catholic priest who sexually abused two altar boys more than 20 years ago has been placed under house arrest.

The Rev. Robert Joseph MacDougall, 62, of Spinnaker Drive, Halifax, received 18 months in jail Tuesday. However, he will do his time in the community if he complies with strict conditions, including having no unsupervised contact with anyone under 18.

Father MacDougall's victims, while disappointed he didn't receive a long jail term, said they are more upset because the church failed them when they first reported the priest 10 years ago.

Rather than defrocking Father MacDougall, the church sent him for counselling. Although he lost his parish, St. Catherine's on Bayers Road, he was allowed to conduct mass occasionally.

"I just turned around and walked out," said one victim, who was startled to see Father MacDougall at the altar during a mass some time after reporting the priest to then-bishop James Hayes.

After several years of struggling with the issue, the victims and their families finally decided

to go to police two years ago.

"I still feel he should have been removed from the priesthood," said the man, now 38, who was fondled twice by Father MacDougall in the early 1970s.

"They sent him for counselling but then they brought him back. It was totally irresponsible. There was no formal apology, no support, nothing."

A similar sentiment was expressed by another victim, now 44.

"I can't imagine being part of an organization that supports that kind of criminal act. I wouldn't be surprised if he has another parish 18 months from now," said the man, who turned his back on the church after he was molested a dozen times from 1969-73.

"We dealt with this as best we could when we became aware of the situation," Monsignor Martin Currie, vicar general of the Archdiocese of Halifax, said in an interview.

He said Father MacDougall's counselling indicated little risk he'd reoffend, a finding upheld by the recent police investigation, which produced no other complainants.

Msgr. Currie said the priest was removed from parish work and, until going on administrative leave after being charged last year, worked mainly with the church's marriage tribunal.

"These things are always very tragic for the victims, the church and society as a whole," the monsignor said.

He said Father MacDougall, who made an emotional apology

to the victims in court, is highly regarded by many young people he dealt with over the years.

If he returns to work, it will be only to rejoin the marriage tribunal, Msgr. Currie said.

But that's little comfort to Father MacDougall's victims, who say they've left the church and also tell their children not to trust church officials.

"It's a hard way to learn a lesson and help others," said one victim, who's having therapy for nightmares and flashbacks from the abuse.

Father MacDougall was to be tried starting May 31 but he pleaded guilty to two counts of indecent assault in return for the community sentence. Two counts of gross indecency were dropped.

Judge Brian Gibson also took into account Father MacDougall's lack of a previous criminal record and the fact his health has deteriorated, leaving him in a wheelchair.

Father MacDougall was an assistant priest at St. Catherine's when the crimes began but has worked in several other metro parishes over the years.

As part of his sentence, he must abide by a nightly curfew except for medical emergencies, and stay home during the day except for errands, doctor's appointments, church duties or for repairs to his wheelchair, scooter or specially equipped van.

He was also ordered to receive treatment for sexual dysfunction if necessary.

The conditional sentence will be followed by a year's probation.