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Lamorinda Catholic churches not immune from sexual predator clergy

By Nick Marnell

Three Roman Catholic priests who served as associate pastors at Lamorinda parishes appeared on a list of clergy "credibly accused of sexual abuse of minors," released Feb. 17 by the Diocese of Oakland. Two of the priests worked at the Church of Santa Maria in Orinda and one had been assigned to St. Monica Church in Moraga. Allegations of sexual abuse of minors had been charged against at least one other priest who served in a Lamorinda parish, but though named in the Oakland report as credibly accused, he was not listed as having worked in Lamorinda.

According to information provided by the diocese, Robert Freitas served at St. Monica from June of 1988 until March 1990, Gary Lagasse worked at Santa Maria in 1972 and Gary Tollner was assigned there in 1971-72. All three had been credibly accused of sexual abuse of minors.

"My first reaction in seeing the list of names of priests who have abused, is one of deep shame. These are monstrous crimes, committed by priests who are supposed to model virtue and grace, not sin and harm. By publishing this list, I am making an 'Act of Contrition' on behalf of my Church," Bishop Michael Barber said in a statement.

Robert Ribeiro appeared in the diocese report but it made no mention of his 1971-80 tenure at St. Perpetua Church in Lafayette, where he was listed as having served in a 2018 report on clergy sexual abuse in the Bay Area. The report was compiled by the Minneapolis law firm Jeff Anderson and Associates, which represents clergy abuse victims.

Three of the accused Lamorinda priests have died and in 2008 Lagasse was excommunicated, the most severe penalty administered by the Catholic Church. A fifth priest, who worked three assignments in the 1980s at Saint Mary's College in Moraga and had been accused of fondling an altar boy, had the charges dismissed in 2017, according to the Catholic Sentinel.

"There has been no credible incident of abuse of a minor by a priest or deacon of the Diocese of Oakland since 1988. I can assure that today, no priest or deacon who is in active ministry in the Diocese of Oakland has a credible allegation of abuse of a minor," Barber said.

Officials of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests called the publication of the list a good first step, but said that the diocese still lacked transparency. "What the diocese should provide are not only all of the names of all who lived or worked in the diocese who are accused, but also their specific work histories, when the diocese first learned of the abusive behavior, and their actions towards that priest to limit the damage he caused then and could cause in the future," Northern California SNAP representative Dan McNevin said.

The organization explained that, according to government and law enforcement statistics, the average clergy abuse victim does not come forward until 30 or more years have passed. "If no one has come forward yet in the Lamorinda area, that does not mean that no children were molested there," SNAP Northwest Leader Joey Piscitelli said. "I've talked to numerous clergy sex abuse victims that waited much longer than 30 years to come forward, and I urge anyone in the Lamorinda area who is ready to come forward to contact police."

None of the priests named in this article had been accused of sexual abuse of minors while serving in the Lamorinda parishes.

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