

Maryland man files abuse suit against priest, Illinois religious order

CHICAGO - A Maryland man filed a civil suit April 14 in U.S. District Court in Chicago claiming that a priest of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart sexually abused him over an eight-year period when he was a child in the 1980s.

The alleged victim, now in his 40s, accused Father Philip DeRea, a popular chaplain on the car racing circuit, of abusing him and also named his religious order in the suit, accusing the order of "negligent supervision" of one of its members.

The case is John Doe v. the Society of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart et al and was filed in U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois. The religious order is based in Aurora, Ill., and according to the lawsuit, Father DeRea currently lives in Aurora and has most recently served as the order's director of development.

The plaintiff is seeking at least \$75,000 in damages for personal injury and unspecified punitive damages against the priest and the religious order. There also is an injunction barring the defendants from releasing his name.

In a statement released by its law firm, the religious order said it was "saddened to learn a lawsuit was filed against us stemming from alleged sexual abuse ... by one of our members."

Catholic News Service received a copy of the statement April 18.

"These allegations are contrary to our mission and all to which we profess. Our prayers go out to all involved in this legal matter, and to all victims of sexual abuse," it said. "The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart are deeply committed to the protection of children, recognizing that this is both a matter of justice and respect for human dignity. Abuse and neglect of minors are contrary to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and our members have a responsibility to protect minors."

Ordained in 1968, Father DeRea has been a chaplain at U.S. auto racetracks since 1971. The priest has said his interest in cars came through his lifelong friendship with racing champion Mario Andretti. They grew up together in Nazareth, Pa.

At a 2009 conference at the Vatican for traveling chaplains, the priest said he attended more than 20 racing events each year, celebrating up to three Masses during a weekend. He also baptized racers' children and officiated at a number of weddings on the racing circuit.

According to the lawsuit, the plaintiff grew up in a close-knit Catholic family in Washington, was an altar boy and attended Catholic school. He first met Father DeRea in 1980, when the priest was living in Washington and working as a fundraiser for his order to provide vehicles to missionaries serving in various countries.

As a boy, the plaintiff offered to shovel snow off the sidewalk outside the priest's residence near his family's home, the suit said. The priest then offered the boy other odd jobs, gave him rides and invited him in for meals and, according to the suit, the abuse began a few months later, starting with fondling. "The sexual contact gradually escalated" and continued for eight years, the suit said.

After he graduated from high school, the plaintiff married, had children and with his family would see Father DeRea on occasion. But in 2006, the suit said, the plaintiff began to realize what "had really happened in his relationship with the priest when he was child" and since then has suffered emotional and psychological trauma that has affected his family and his business.

The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart statement said the order was one of the first religious communities to meet standards for prevention of child abuse and become accredited by Praesidium Inc., an Arlington, Texas-based risk-management firm which assists religious organizations, schools, recreation programs and nursing homes in preventing sexual and physical abuse.

"Our prayers go out to all involved in this legal matter, and to all victims of sexual abuse," it said.