

Pittsburgh bishop calls accusation made against him ‘false, offensive’

PITTSBURGH – Pittsburgh Bishop David A. Zubik has strenuously denied an accusation made on a website that he had sexually assaulted a student decades ago while he served at a Catholic high school in the Pittsburgh Diocese in the 1980s.

“I emphatically state that no such behavior occurred, nor any semblance of such behavior,” Bishop Zubik said in a statement released at a news conference Oct. 5. “The accusation is false, offensive and outrageous.”

The accusation against Bishop Zubik was made public in a blog that came to the attention of the Diocese of Pittsburgh Oct. 3, posted by a Beaver County man. He also accused a religious sister of molestation. In addition, he accused his pastor of violating the seal of confession. All of the allegations have been vehemently denied.

“Given the public nature of this false accusation against me as a religious leader in southwestern Pennsylvania, I have an obligation in conscience and moreover I desire to inform you of this matter,” the bishop said.

The accuser, who is not being named because he is an alleged victim of abuse, first sent two emails Aug. 21 to his pastor, in which he began to make a series of progressive accusations. In one of these emails, he accused Bishop Zubik of attempting to forcibly kiss him decades ago in the chapel at Quigley Catholic High School in Baden. Then-Father Zubik served at Quigley from 1980 to 1987.

After the pastor delivered the contents of the emails, Bishop Zubik instructed the diocesan assistance coordinator, Rita Flaherty, to contact the accuser after his pastor related the contents of the e-mails to the bishop. The accuser did not respond to phone messages or a letter from Flaherty concerning this accusation.

Even though the accusation was received secondhand, Bishop Zubik insisted that it be turned over to the Beaver County district attorney in accord with diocesan policy. The information was received by the district attorney Sept. 1. Bishop Zubik also directly informed the apostolic nunciature of the Holy See in the United States of the

accusation at a meeting in Washington Sept. 12. That information was then forwarded to the Vatican. In addition, the accusation has been turned over to the independent Diocesan Review Board.

The diocese had previous contact with the accuser Sept. 10, 2010, when Flaherty responded to the accuser's allegations that he had been assaulted by two priests, one in 1979 and the other in 1989. The two priests named by the accuser had been dismissed from ministry decades ago. The accuser was offered the opportunity to meet with the bishop at that time. He said he would think about it and only called for an appointment with the bishop in May 2011.

Bishop Zubik's practice is to meet pastorally with any person claiming to be a victim of abuse by clergy. Bishop Zubik and Flaherty met with the accuser and his wife June 1, 2011. At that meeting, instead of discussing those accusations, the accuser asked Bishop Zubik to intercede on his behalf in the clearance process required of any person who wishes to volunteer in a Catholic parish in the diocese. The accuser was concerned that, in light of a police record against him, his liturgical service might be in jeopardy. Bishop Zubik stated that he was unable to interfere in that process.

The accusation against Bishop Zubik that was made in late August came after the accuser was informed by his pastor that he was deemed ineligible for liturgical ministry by the Diocesan Examination Board.

Bishop Zubik said every priest fears "someone, sometime, somewhere, somehow will level a false accusation against him. That nightmare has been realized for me."

"May I assure you that I am concerned about the welfare of my accuser. At the same time, I expect that my integrity and the integrity of the church I lead will be respected as well," he said in his statement.

Bishop Zubik also asked for prayers for his accuser and for himself.