

St. Leo pastor accused of abuse, removed from ministry

The pastor of St. Leo church in Little Italy has been removed from ministry by his religious order and stripped of his faculties to function as a priest.

Parishioners were informed of the action by officials from the Society of Catholic Apostolate during a Nov. 18 meeting at the church.

It was reported that a man has accused Father Michael Salerno, S.A.C., of sexually abusing him when he was in his early teens.

“The alleged abuse occurred in the 1970s while then-Brother Salerno was a Pallottine brother serving at All Saints Catholic Church in Brooklyn, N.Y.,” said Father Peter Sticco, S.A.C., provincial leader of the religious order, also known as the Pallottines. “When informed of the allegation, Father Salerno immediately agreed to obtain counseling and to cooperate with the church’s procedures for handling allegations of abuse. He did not admit or deny that the abuse occurred.”

The Pallottines said that the man who made the allegation reported it to his own diocese, those officials passed the information onto the Archdiocese of Baltimore, who contacted Father Sticco Nov. 14. Civil authorities in New York have been notified about the allegation.

Father Salerno is no longer in residence at St. Leo and the Pallottines are conducting an investigation into the accusation that will determine his fate as a priest, Father Sticco told the visibly upset and concerned parishioners.

“Church authorities will investigate to establish the truth of the allegations,” said Phillip J. Ward, the attorney for the Pallottines, who said there was no way of knowing how long it will take, but the Vatican would be involved.

During the investigation, Father Salvatore C. Furnari, S.A.C., associate pastor of St. Leo, will run the day to day operations of the parish and will be assisted by Father Frank Donio, S.A.C., Father Sticco said.

A Brooklyn native, Father Salerno has been a driving force at St. Leo during the past decade and is credited with re-energizing the Little Italy parish, attracting new members at a time when other Baltimore City churches struggled to stay open due to dwindling congregations.

More than 100 St. Leo parishioners attended the meeting in the church called specifically to announce Father Salerno's removal.

Some cried during the announcement, others walked out of the church, others voiced their support for Father Salerno, and several expressed suspicion of a man who would make an accusation of an offense he claims happened more than 30 years ago.

Father Sticco told parishioners he had met with the accuser and the man has only so far asked for counseling.

Though he wouldn't say where Father Salerno was staying during the investigation, Father Sticco did say the priest was being "well cared for" and parishioners could bring their letters and cards of encouragement to St. Leo's and they would be given to him.

"Father Salerno also expressed concern for the parish and the people of St. Leo's," Father Sticco said, "and his expectation that the parish would come together during this difficult time, because it is such a strong community of faith."

Father Salerno began his religious life as a professed brother in 1968 and was ordained a priest in 1993.

He was assigned to Queen of Apostles in Sag Harbor, N.Y. from 1968-69, and again from 1978-84; Our Lady of Pompeii, Brooklyn, from 1969-71, and again from 1990-97; All Saints, Brooklyn, from 1971-78; Bishop Eustace High School in Pennsauken, N.J., from 1984-87; My Brother's Place in Brooklyn from 1987-90; and St. Leo from 1997-2007.

"We come forward today with information about this allegation to encourage other possible victims to come forward and to be transparent, as called for in the Bishops' Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," Father Sticco said.

"I think the whole parish is in shock. Actually, I would say disbelief," said Fran Brooks of Cockeysville, who has been a parishioner of St. Leo's for six years. "All of our hearts are aching for Father Mike and what is ahead for him."

Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar for the archdiocese, called on the parishioners to rely on their faith during this time of sadness.

"This is a tough one, but it's something we must do," Bishop Madden said. "Those who make an accusation, they are God's children. Those who are accused are God's children."

Anyone with additional information that is pertinent to this case is urged to call the Pallottines at 973-762-2926, or the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Office of Child and Youth Protection Hotline at 1-866-417-7469.