

Editorial – Church History Missing In Burlington Verdict

The Catholic Observer (Springfield, MA)

May 23, 2008

The Diocese of Burlington's decision to appeal the record-setting \$7.8 million verdict against it in a clergy misconduct case is certain to prolong the course of justice.

But it is necessary, both for the financial ability of the church in Vermont to effectively minister and for its efforts to correct the public's understanding of church history.

Predictably, attorney-allied groups like the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP), cited "an ancient, rigid, secretive, all-male monarchy that essentially answers to no one."

But Vermont media interviewed presumably fair-minded jurors in the Father Edward Paquette case who expressed disappointment that they did not hear how the church might have changed its handling of sexual misconduct cases. Barred from hearing such testimony by the trial judge, the jurors understandably voted to award Perry Babel \$7,750,000 in punitive damages to teach the church to "change its ways."

In fact, the late Bishop John A. Marshall, who headed the Burlington Diocese from 1972 to 1992 before becoming bishop of Springfield, had learned his lesson more than 20 years ago.

Bishop Marshall, like nearly all of his counterparts across the United States, clearly had a flawed understanding of the nature of clerical misconduct when he was a young bishop in Vermont. He sent offending priests to poorly run treatment centers, and relied on bad advice from medical professionals who said that habitual priest offenders could be "cured" with prayer and therapy. And he either wittingly or unwittingly accepted priests into his rural diocese who had previously abused minors.

But all that had changed by the early 1980s, as recorded in Bishops Marshall's documented actions. He permanently removed Father Paquette from ministry in 1978. And while he returned another troubled priest to ministry the following year, by 1981 he had removed that priest from ministry, and petitioned the Vatican for his laicization.

As he told a reporter for this newspaper in 1992, Bishop Marshall overcome considerable resistance in Rome to the idea of involuntarily laicizing a priest.

In the late 1980s, when cases of clerical misconduct became a media scandal in Chicago, the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardine established the nation's first all-lay, independent board to examine clerical misconduct. Bishop Marshall was one of a handful of bishops who first adopted Chicago's model.

It is probably no accident that there have been no documented cases of clerical misconduct with minors since 1987 in the Diocese of Springfield, which Bishop Marshall headed a decade before the Dallas norms on misconduct became church law in 2004.

His 20-year record of "getting it" after making tragic mistakes during his early years in Burlington should have been heard by the jury.