

© The Catholic News & Herald, Feb. 6, 2009

Priest sentenced for sexual abuse

Diocese encourages prayers for victims of abuse

CHARLOTTE — A priest who had served in the Diocese of Charlotte has been sentenced for sexual abuse.

Capuchin Franciscan Father Robert Yurgel was sentenced Feb. 2 to at least seven years and eight months in prison after pleading guilty to second-degree sex offense. He'll also have to register as a sex offender.

In April 2008, Father Yurgel was arrested in New Jersey, where he was ministering in a hospital, on sexual abuse charges involving a minor.

Father Yurgel served at St. Matthew and Our Lady of Consolation churches in Charlotte in the late 1990s, when the incidents occurred. In October 1999, Father Yurgel's order, the Capuchin Franciscans, assigned him to ministry in New Jersey.

The victim, now in his early 20s, recently reported the matter to police. The Diocese of Charlotte was not made aware of the allegations or the investigation prior to the April 2 announcement of the arrest by police.

“The Diocese of Charlotte was deeply saddened to learn of the sexual abuse of a teenage victim by Father Robert Yurgel ... and asks for prayers for the victim, the victim's family, the perpetrator and for others who have been affected by the sinful crime of sexual abuse,” said a diocesan statement issued Feb. 2 in response to the sentencing.

The victim has named the diocese, the Capuchin Franciscan order and Father Yurgel in a civil lawsuit, alleging a cover up.

“During Father Yurgel's time in Charlotte, the diocese was not made aware of any complaints concerning his conduct with minors,” the diocesan statement said.

Shortly after the arrest, priests at St. Matthew and Our Lady of Consolation churches urged anyone who has been victimized by Father Yurgel or others to contact civil authorities.

In its Feb. 2 statement, the diocese also urged victims to contact civil authorities and emphasized its continued commitment to sexual-abuse awareness.

The diocese implemented a sexual abuse policy in 1989 and in 2002 adopted the U.S. bishops' “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.” Since that time, more than 20,000 diocesan employees and church volunteers have attended the church's sexual-abuse awareness training program, “Protecting God's Children.”

The diocese conducts background checks on all employees and volunteers to safeguard the young and vulnerable. More than 19,900 background checks have been conducted.

The training and background checks are ongoing.

In June 2002 at a meeting in Dallas, Texas, the U.S. bishops adopted the charter and its mandates for an annual audit and survey, and also adopted the "Essential Norms" to assure that all dioceses adhere to the charter.

The charter also established the Office of Child and Youth Protection and the National Review Board to oversee compliance with the charter. The Diocese of Charlotte has been found to be in consistent compliance.

The charter was updated in 2005, the norms in 2006. The charter and norms have Vatican approval.

NEED ASSISTANCE?

As a part of its commitment to support the U.S. bishops' "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," the Diocese of Charlotte has appointed a coordinator to assist survivors of sexual abuse.

The assistance coordinator can help survivors of abuse, whether the incident took place in the Diocese of Charlotte or in another diocese.

The current coordinator is David Harold. Contact him at (704) 370-3363 or dwharold@charlottediocese.org.