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Fortier Guilty in Altar Boy Sex Assaults. Bishop: Priest Didn't Deal with His Problems. Victim's Dad Hopes Shunning of Family at Church Will Stop

By Michael McCord
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DOVER In the end, the jury chose to believe the altar boys and not their priest.

After less than a day of deliberations, a Strafford County Superior court jury found the Rev. Roger A. Fortier guilty on all 16 counts of sexually assaulting two teenage altar boys between 1994 and 1997.

Families of both victims broke into tears and hugged each other as the female foreman for the nine-woman, three-man jury said guilty with a somber voice to each of the indictments read by the court clerk yesterday afternoon.

Fortier, who served at St. Peter's Parish in Farmington from 1991 until his arrest Oct. 28, stood quietly by his attorney Stephen Jeffco and did not visibly react to the jury's verdict. Fortier, 51, was led away in handcuffs to Strafford County jail. Judge Bruce E. Mohl said Fortier will be sentenced within the first two weeks of October. He faces a potential state prison jail sentence of more than 175 years.

Fortier said, "No comment," when he was asked about the verdict. He did thank those parishioners who supported him since his arrest last October. Jeffco also said he had no comment.

For families of both victims, the verdict brings to an end one phase of a painful ordeal that began when the allegations first surfaced. Doris Young, the mother of Andrew, the 14-year-old who was the first victim to come forward, still had tears in her eyes minutes after Fortier was convicted.

"We thank you (the jury) for answering all our prayers. We can begin to put this behind us and begin healing not only in the church, which has been so divided, but also the community. My heart goes out to those people who supported him, but he (Fortier) is not a martyr and it's time for people to accept that," Young said.

Thomas Harding Sr., the father of the 18-year-old victim who testified during the trial that Fortier had abused him repeatedly in 1994 and 1995, hugged his son in the courtroom as the verdict was read. Harding said Fortier had been a close personal friend of his and the family.

Outside the courtroom, Harding said, "We knew in our hearts that our sons weren't lying. And there are 12 other people (the jury) who know that as well. But he (Fortier) still has one more court to hear from, upstairs with God," Harding said.

Harding's son said he hopes Fortier "rots in hell for a long time." His girlfriend, Jamie Stockford of Barrington, said Fortier "is getting what he deserves. He lied. How can he call himself a priest?"

Both families had no comment when asked about whether they are pursuing civil suits against Fortier and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Manchester.

Prosecutor Lincoln Soldati said while the jury took longer to deliberate than he expected almost six hours he was pleased jurors were "methodical and didn't rush to judgment."

The verdict repudiated defense attorney Jeffco's "scorched earth" attempt to discredit the powerful testimony of the two victims or that Fortier was an unfairly targeted gay priest, Soldati said. "There was a great deal at stake and they understood what was happening all along" during five-day trial.

Soldati also said he hoped the families of the victims could begin to heal their wounds. "They've been shunned by other members of the church but they've not lost their compassion or concern. This wasn't about vengeance. It was justice."

One of the jurors, who has chosen to remain anonymous, said the jury carefully considered all the evidence but the key was the testimony of both victims. "They were troubled but credible, very credible and the state's case was very convincing."

Fortier faces another trial arising from an alleged assault that took place with another victim while he served at St. Peter's. Last month, Fortier was indicted on one count of aggravated felonious sexual assault of a 16-year-old male parishioner in Feb. 1997. A court date has yet to be set for this latest charge. Bishop: Priest Didn't Deal With His Problems.

The acting head of the Catholic Church in New Hampshire yesterday called the Rev. Roger Fortier "a good and effective priest" who did not deal with his own problems.

In a statement released after the verdict, Auxiliary Bishop Francis Christian also expressed sympathy for Fortier's victims.

"I am sad for Father Fortier who in so many ways has been a good and effective priest and now has lost everything because he did not deal effectively with his problems," said Christian, who is administrator of the diocese until September.

"I am sad for all the other faithful priests and Catholic people who must one way or another bear the stigma of the weakness and failure of one of our own."

Bishop-designate John McCormack takes over as Bishop of Manchester next month.

If past practices are any indication, Fortier will likely retain the title of priest, but not the duties.

Diocesan spokesman Matt McSorley yesterday said neither Keene priest Gordon MacRae nor Troy priest Leo Shea has been defrocked, or laicized as termed by the church.

Both were sentenced in 1994 on felony sex crime charges. They, like Fortier, are officially on administrative suspension and cannot perform any sacraments or priestly functions, McSorley said.

Laicization "has to come from Rome. The bishop can't do that," McSorley said.

"Suspension has the same effect as laicization," McSorley said. "The difference is strictly a canonical matter of law, the practical effect is the same thing."

In his statement, Christian said he is sad for the victims and their families. The bishop prays for their healing and will assist the healing process in every way possible, he said.

Also, parishioners at St. Peter's Church in Farmington, where Fortier was pastor since 1991, will be affected by the betrayal of trust they placed in Fortier, Christian said.

Christian took the unusual step visiting St. Peter's shortly after Fortier's arrest in late October.

"I urged them to pray that the truth be discovered because only the truth can set us free," Christian said in the statement. "I pray that the judgment that has been rendered will be a building block for all of us so that we can begin to restore and rebuild that community of compassion, forgiveness and love that God desires for us."

Victim's Dad Hopes Shunning of Family at Church Will Stop

By MICHAEL McCORD Special to the Union Leader

DOVER Thomas Harding Sr., a member of St. Peter's Parish in Farmington for more than 32 years

and father of one the victims sexually assaulted by Rev. Roger Fortier, is relieved the criminal part of his family's nine-month ordeal is over.

With his 18-year-old son sitting next to him, Harding said in an interview following Fortier's conviction yesterday, the future of some matters is uncertain. He does plan to resign from the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus, a local Catholic organization, because too many chapter members supported Fortier. He still plans to attend St. Peter's and hopes the shunning of him and his family will stop.

"We go to church and too many people have had their noses up in the air at us and made snotty remarks. It's time to move on," he said. His son, who appeared weary from the week-long trial, laid his head down on the table and said, "I'm never going back there."

Harding, who receives disability and has retired, gave no comment on the status of a potential civil suit against Fortier and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Manchester. But Harding has little doubt that the Diocese should be held accountable in some manner.

Harding worked as the administrative assistant at St. Peter's from 1992 to 1994, he said.

Unlike the Youngs, the family of the 14-year-old victim, Harding said he wasn't surprised when Fortier's defense attorney Stephen Jeffco said during the trial that his client was a "gay priest."

"I knew. I've known for a long time, maybe five or six years ago. They (the Diocese) told me. He (Fortier) told me on one occasion. I worked there, and knew much of what was going on. They knew he had problems," Harding said.

According to Harding, he was told by then Msgr. Francis Christian in 1993 that Fortier was going to a hospital in St. Louis to sort out various health problems, including to deal with alcohol and homosexuality issues.

When Fortier returned after the extended medical sabbatical in late fall 1993, according to Harding he was assured by Christian that Fortier had been treated and while he had homosexual inclinations that had been dealt with, he wasn't a pedophile and could be trusted around boys.

"Never in a million years would I not trust what they told me," Harding said.

But yesterday, diocesan spokesman Matthew McSorley disputed Harding's account.

"It is diocesan policy, and Bishop Christian's practice, never to discuss the details of a treatment for personal problems with anyone," McSorley said. "So it is inconceivable he could have had any such conversation."

According to his son's trial testimony, Fortier began assaulting him in January 1994, within weeks after the priest's return from his medical sabbatical.

Before he reluctantly came forward following Fortier's arrest last October, Harding's son said he was afraid that if he told what had happened between Fortier and him, he would lose his girlfriend, Jamie Stockford of Barrington, the mother of their baby daughter who will celebrate her first birthday at the end of this month. Fortier baptized their daughter last year.

The young man eventually asked his father to tell Stockford what happened and she says she held her boyfriend for a while as he cried. "I'm glad this is over, but I think something like this, it's never gonna leave my head," the young man said.

For Harding and his wife Margaret, their reactions to the verdict are mixed. "He was a close family friend who was involved in many family occasions and every holiday," Margaret Harding said.

"He was a close personal friend of mine for a long time. And he was a good person to us until we found out. . . ," said Thomas Harding with a sad voice. "No individual can win in a case like this."

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