

Priest won't face charges in teen sex case

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The Saginaw County prosecutor has declined to seek charges against a priest who this spring admitted to having a sexual relationship with a teenage parishioner 30 years ago.

Now, parishioners at Zilwaukee Township's St. Matthew Catholic Church will wait to see if the Rev. Richard T. Szafranski will return.

Prosecutor Michael D. Thomas said the victim indicated she was over the age of consent — 16 in Michigan — at the time the relationship began in the mid-1970s.

"There was no proof that a crime had occurred," Thomas said. "Even if she was wrong on the date ... it's well beyond the statute of limitations."

Thomas estimated the statute

expired three years after the woman turned 16. The victim on Tuesday told Thomas she was "in agreement with our decision," he said.

At a Palm Sunday Mass in April, Bishop Robert J. Carlson told parishioners of the church, 511 W. Cornell, that the Catholic Diocese of Saginaw had removed their priest pending action by the prosecutor. Carlson said the unidentified victim's private counselor told church officials that the woman had a sexual relationship with the priest when she was 16 or 17 and Szafranski was in his mid-20s.

Supportive parishioners said the investigation has "ruined (the priest's) life."

"Hopefully the church will say it's over and done with; now let's move on," said Catherine M. Stine, 44.

Stine of Zilwaukee Township

joined the congregation about 11 years ago.

"To this point, it has ruined his life. He was a very liked man," she said. "We're happy he's past this phase, and hopefully it will get better for him."

The prosecutor's decision also was good news to St. Matthew parishioner Sofia Fuentes, 82, of Zilwaukee Township.

"It was so unfair the way Father Szafranski was treated," she said.

"I am so glad he is not going to be prosecuted. Everyone jumped in before they had all the facts; as a result, Father Szafranski's almost a broken man. We cry and pray all the time for him. And we're hearing almost nothing from him or about him."

Church leaders removed Szafranski from his post and sent him to a "safe place" during the investigation.

Now, church leaders must decide on their own course of action for the priest.

"We really would like to have him come back," said Fuentes, a member of the church since 1955.

"However, we'll have to see what the church is going to do for him."

Church officials ordained Szafranski in 1975 while he was a deacon at St. Josaphat Catholic Church in Carrollton Township. He also has served at St. Stephen and SS. Peter and Paul in Saginaw, St. Vincent de Paul in Bay City, St. Mary University in Mount Pleasant, St. Francis X. Cabrini in Vassar, St. Bernard in Millington and St. John the Baptist in Carrollton Township.

There are no other allegations of misconduct in Szafranski's personnel file, Carlson has said. ♦