



## THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE

Office of Communications • *The Long Island Catholic* • *Fe Fuerza Vida*

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### STATEMENT

**DATE:** August 20, 2018

**RE:** Response to *Catholic News Agency* Article Regarding  
Fr. Michael Lawrence

**FROM:** Sean P. Dolan

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On August 16, 2018, the *Catholic News Agency* (CNA) published an analysis piece regarding a case mentioned in the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report, released on August 14, 2018. Unfortunately, the CNA article leaves out some important facts regarding this case.

The case concerns Fr. Michael Lawrence of Allentown, Pennsylvania, an admitted sexual abuser who retired in 2002 and who was thereafter placed by the Diocese of Allentown in a secure and supervised living facility for sexual abusers. During that time, the Diocese of Allentown opened up its files on all abusers to the local district attorneys and subsequently all reports of abuse were forwarded to law enforcement. In July 2009, Msgr. John O. Barres left his home diocese of Wilmington, Delaware, to be ordained the new bishop of Allentown.

In 2011 a previously unmade allegation of sexual abuse that occurred years before was made against Fr. Lawrence. The report was immediately forwarded to law enforcement and Bishop Barres subsequently began proceedings to have Lawrence removed from the clerical state (he had long since been removed from ministry). In April of 2014 Fr. Lawrence chose as his canon lawyer the Rev. David Szatkowski, SCJ, a religious order priest. In a letter to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the Vatican office charged with ruling on such matters), dated December 11, 2014, and reproduced in the Grand Jury Report, Bishop Barres wrote that he thought it better that Fr. Lawrence remain in the clerical state so that he could continue to “live a permanent life of prayer and penance” under a “supervised way of life.” Bishop Barres was concerned that, were Fr. Lawrence to be removed from the clerical state, he might then choose to leave the secure facility and so pose a renewed threat to children. Lawrence died four months later.

The CNA article asserts that Bishop Barres should not have allowed Fr. Szatkowski to represent Fr. Lawrence. According to the article, Fr. Szatkowski was arrested in 2011 for sexual assault for grabbing a fifteen-year old girl. Following an investigation and after consultation with the young woman, the district attorney dropped all charges against Fr. Szatkowski, who was placed back in ministry by his religious community.



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Apparently unaware of two key facts, the article contends that Bishop Barres should not have allowed Szatkowski to serve as Fr. Lawrence's canonical counsel. First, Bishop Barres did not know of the allegations against Fr. Szatkowski, who was a religious-order priest serving in another state, with no connection to the Diocese of Allentown, and who was not personally known to the Bishop. Second, a person in a canonical proceeding has the right to choose his own counsel. Fr. Lawrence chose Fr. Szatkowski who, as a canon lawyer and as a priest allowed to engage in ministry by his own religious community, fulfilled the requirements to serve in that capacity.

The article also asserts that Bishop Barres "relied heavily on Szatkowski's canonical advocacy" in his decision to ask the CDF to keep Lawrence in the clerical state. That is incorrect. Bishop Barres was bound by canon law to consult the material Fr. Lawrence's counsel submitted, but he also consulted a report prepared by a psychologist, a statement by the director of the secure facility where the priest was living, and his own diocesan advisors. As stated earlier, Bishop Barres made his decision to keep Fr. Lawrence in the clerical state in order to keep him supervised and away from children.

Bishop Barres would have preferred to see Fr. Lawrence both removed from the clerical state and kept supervised and away from children. Because it appeared unlikely that both could be accomplished, Bishop Barres and his advisors unanimously chose to put the safety of children first. He stands by that decision.