

METRO EXCLUSIVE

Victim of priest sex abuse rejects \$200K payout from Catholic church

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Paul Dunn

J.C. Rice

A man who has accused a Queens priest of sexually molesting him as a boy has rejected a \$200,000 offer from the Catholic Church because the money “doesn’t even come close” to delivering justice.

“I choose to stand on the side of survivors who want to fight,” Paul J. Dunn, 53, told The Post. “There’s no amount of money that will make me feel better.”

The Diocese of Brooklyn, which also covers Queens, offered Dunn a cash settlement in June after he detailed four occasions when priest Cornelius T. Otero coerced him into performing oral sex and forced him to pose naked in “hundreds” of photos when he was a boy, diocese records show.

For the first time, Dunn is coming forward with his story, detailing his suffering to The Post and explaining why he’s turning down a settlement.

Dunn was 10 or 11 when he and Otero, who died in 1998, grew close at St. Joan of Arc Church summer camp in Jackson Heights in 1977 or 1978. Dunn doesn't recall the exact year.

"He befriended me right away," Dunn recalled. "He played kickball with us, took pictures of us, and I trusted him."

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One day, Otero whisked Dunn and a few other boys to a Jones Beach swimming pool for "fun." But the sunny day took a dark turn when Otero allegedly ushered him inside a cabana-style changing room.

"He ordered me to take my clothes off while he took pictures," Dunn said. "I was terrified and frozen with fear. I couldn't speak or move."

Over four months that summer, the alleged abuse escalated.

Once, Otero found Dunn and his friends playing kickball in the basement of St. Joan of Arc Catholic School and angrily instructed all the kids except Dunn to leave.

The priest then escorted the boy into a bathroom and forced him to perform oral sex while Otero took photos, Dunn alleged.

"He said God would be angry with me if I didn't do what he wanted," Dunn recalled.

He was allegedly coerced into performing oral sex three more times.

Otero also forced Dunn to touch the priest's genitals while he fondled the boy, Dunn said.

"He told me it was our secret game with God and if I told anyone, I would die and go to hell," Dunn said.

Otero would take Dunn to get ice cream afterward.

"It was typical abuser behavior," Dunn said. "Play nice afterwards to make you confused and ashamed."

In 1979, Otero was arrested for “selling 40 books containing obscene photographs of children” to undercover cops in a Manhattan garage, according to court documents.



Paul Dunn as a child

But the priest dodged jail after agreeing to help the NYPD net other predators as an informant, according to an April 1980 Post report. He assisted in at least two arrests, the report says.

The diocese was quick to shuffle Otero out of state, and he worked at St. Francis Hospital in Hartford, Conn., from 1988 to 1995.

Otero worked at two Queens churches — St. Joan of Arc (from 1972 to 1980) and St. Teresa’s (1967-1971) — and at Queen of All Saints in Brooklyn (1959-1966).

After the summer of abuse, Dunn refused to return to St. Joan of Arc church. He turned to drugs and alcohol to “numb the pain” and harmed himself.

“I acted out. I was a cutter,” Dunn said.

At age 15, he attempted suicide, slitting his wrists.

“It was a cry for help,” Dunn said.

Dunn has battled addiction, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and agoraphobia for the last 40 years.

He attributes three failed marriages to his trauma.

“I can’t keep a steady relationship because I can’t open up,” said Dunn, who runs an estate-sale company. “I can tell my story to somebody, but it just pushes me away from people.”

While he and his current wife have been together for five years, he still feels “vulnerable and isolated.”

“We’re not divorced yet, but we might go that way,” he said.

For the Queens native, the best medicine may be justice.

He is fighting to help pass the state Child Victims Act, which would give victims a one-year window to sue over cases that occurred beyond the current statute of limitations.

“I want my day in court with them,” Dunn said of diocese officials. “I honestly believe it’s coming sooner rather than later.”

The Diocese of Brooklyn has paid out 364 settlements through its Independent Reconciliation and Compensation Program. Officials have refused to disclose the sums of the settlements.

Carolyn Erstad, a diocese spokeswoman, would not address Dunn’s claims but said the diocese has “no influence over” settlements offered by the mediation panel.

Brooklyn Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio said he was “sad and angry to hear the story of Paul Dunn and the stories of all those sexually abused as children by members of the clergy.”

“I am grateful to all those who have had the courage to come forward,” he said.

Dunn’s lawyer, Michael Reck, praised his client.

“His selfless rejection of the church officials’ payoff is inspiring for survivors across the nation,” he said.

While Dunn seeks to hold Catholic authorities accountable for widespread sexual abuse of children, he believes Otero is getting the treatment he deserves.

6/27/2019

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“He’s in hell facing what he did right now,” he said. “And the rest will get what’s coming.”

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