

Priest accused of sexual abuse placed on leave

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Bishop Michael McAuliffe responded Friday to allegations the Rev. John Whiteley, a local Catholic priest, sexually abused a Moberly boy 20 years ago.

In a civil suit filed Thursday, the plaintiff, listed as John Z. Doe, alleges Whiteley sodomized and sexually abused him over a period of four years, from 1967 through 1971. Doe, who is now 34, said he gave the diocese nine months warning the suit was to be filed and officials did not communicate with either him or his lawyers.

McAuliffe had a different perspective. "As I look at my papers, we had a letter dated Nov. 9 that indicated they were going to initiate a lawsuit and they were going to do this within 10 days," McAuliffe said. "There was some verbal communication between the lawyers, but we received nothing more."

McAuliffe said the November letter is the only accusation of sexual abuse involving Whiteley the diocese has ever received.

The diocese received a copy at noon Friday of the suit filed in Cole County Circuit Court, McAuliffe said. "It was only through the courtesy of the news media that we knew what was happening."

The diocese will put Whiteley on

administrative leave while it begins an investigation, he said.

"We have to find out whether there is any substance to this allegation," McAuliffe said. "We try to think about the victim, and we try to think about the man who is being accused. We have to assume the man is innocent until proven guilty."

McAuliffe and the Jefferson City diocese have been named as co-defendants in the civil suit because Doe believes they "knew or should have known" about the abuse and yet permitted it to continue.

"I became bishop in 1969 and so I wasn't even here when these events allegedly began in 1967," McAuliffe said.

Doe's attorney, Michael Hoare of St. Louis, said he plans to request personnel files on Whiteley as well as other records concerning possible previous complaints of abuse and what the diocese has done about them.

Doe is suing for an unspecified amount of monetary damages. Hoare said he had not been contacted yet by the diocese's attorney, Lou Defeo of Jefferson City.

Whiteley is on vacation in the San Francisco Bay Area and could not be reached for comment.

Missourian Staff Writer Katherine Mooney contributed to this report.