

California Diocese's Documents Show Abuse Cover-Up

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LOS ANGELES, May 18 - Thousands of pages of confidential church documents detailing sexual abuses by priests in Orange County, Calif., were released this week, exposing the extent to which clergy members, one of them now a bishop elsewhere, concealed accusations of abuse.

In the documents, unveiled Tuesday under a court order after a \$100 million settlement of charges involving 90 accusers, senior officials of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange County were shown to have routinely moved priests and church employees accused of sexual misconduct from parish to parish, usually without warning anyone of the extent of the accusations against them and often providing glowing reports of their abilities. At the same time, the documents show, families that complained of certain priests' behavior toward their children were often ignored or told lies.

In one case, the Rev. Eleuterio Ramos, who admitted to the police in 2003 that he had molested at least 25 boys, including involvement in the gang-rape of a boy in a San Diego hotel room in 1984, was transferred in 1985 to a parish in Tijuana, Mexico, where the Orange County Diocese continued to send him a monthly paycheck and pay his car expenses. The Tijuana Diocese was not informed of the full extent of the priest's abuses, according to the documents. Father Ramos died last year.

Against objections from church officials, Judge Peter D. Lichtman of Los Angeles Superior Court ordered the Orange County Diocese, which has more than a million parishioners, to release personnel files, letters between church leaders and psychological reports of priests, although the diocese, citing privacy concerns, succeeded in withholding parts of some priests' files. Lawyers for some plaintiffs said they would appeal.

The release of some 10,000 pages of documents pleased many of the plaintiffs in the Orange County cases, although they objected to the fact that other documents remained under wraps.

"There were not only horrible crimes committed against children, but the extent of the cover-up is unbelievable," said Joelle Casteix, 34, who said she was abused for two years as a teenager by a lay teacher whose files the judge did not release. "Many men who are still in ministry today, and some who are bishops, conspired to conceal the crimes and keep molesters in positions where they could still molest children."

The Orange County cases, spanning 1936 to 1996, included claims against 31 priests, 10 lay personnel, two nuns and one religious brother. Two former Orange County bishops, Norman F. McFarland and William R. Johnson, and a former auxiliary bishop, Michael P. Driscoll, now bishop of Boise, Idaho, are shown in the documents to have participated in the cover-ups. Several other top church officials were also involved, the documents say. Bishop Johnson is dead, and Bishop McFarland, who retired in 1998, could not be reached for comment.

From Boise, Bishop Driscoll issued a statement on May 5 in which he apologized for his role in the way accused priests were dispatched while he served in Orange County in the late 1970's and 1980's. "It is now painfully clear to me that the way we handled those abuse cases was terribly wrong," the bishop said. Reached by telephone on Wednesday, his spokeswoman, Colette Cowman, said Bishop Driscoll would not address the matter further.

"He feels like he doesn't want to go into the details of the documents," Ms. Cowman said. "What he feels is that no matter what he says, there will be people who will still be upset. He made a heartfelt apology, and he stands by that."

The current bishop of Orange County, Tod D. Brown, who assumed his post in September 1998, said in a telephone interview on Wednesday that it was Judge Lichtman, and not diocese officials, who decided which files to release and which to withhold. He acknowledged, however, that the diocese "did attempt to exercise some privacy rights as to some of the contents."

"We've made it clear that our focus is on healing and reconciliation," Bishop Brown said. "These people were very egregiously injured."

Bishop Brown said the diocese had established safeguards to prevent a recurrence of acts of molesting, particularly, he said, "in terms of trying to educate children and youth to be aware of any dangers they might come across." Asked about what was being done about priests and church employees, he replied that they, too, were receiving "regular education sessions."

The vast number of pedophile-priest cases around the country, while "appalling," he said, amounts to "only a minuscule number" of active clergy members.

The \$100 million settlement, announced in January, was the highest paid by a diocese in the United States to settle sexual abuse cases. It surpassed the Archdiocese of Boston's agreement in 2002 to pay \$85 million to 552 plaintiffs, and may have the effect of increasing the amount of money in play as the Archdiocese of Los Angeles struggles to settle 544 abuse claims against it. The Los Angeles Archdiocese, under Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, has fought vigorously to keep its files secret.

John Manly, a lawyer who represents 30 of the plaintiffs in Orange County and 100 elsewhere, said the documents show that the diocese was aware of the scope of the abuse and did little to stop it. "They were certain these people were going to molest again, and they did," Mr. Manly said.

The documents released under the Orange County settlement show that several church officials either actively concealed the actions of abusive priests or sought lesser punishment for them.

In the late 1980's, the Rev. George Niederauer, now the bishop of Salt Lake City and a former spiritual director of St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, Calif., asked for leniency from a judge for the Rev. Andrew Christian Andersen, an Orange County priest who had been convicted of 26 counts of child abuse. Bishop Niederauer wrote in a letter that the boys might have interpreted "horse play" as molesting.

Bishop Niederauer did not return a call to his office on Wednesday.

A priest from Milwaukee, the Rev. Siegfried Widera, who was convicted in 1973 of molesting boys and banned from appointments to parishes in Wisconsin, was allowed to work in Orange County beginning in 1977 after the Archbishop of Milwaukee at the time, William E. Cousins, called Bishop Johnson and suggested that "there would seem to be no great risk" in allowing Father Widera to return to pastoral work. The documents show that Father Widera began abusing Orange County boys almost immediately, but he was not removed from duty until 1985.

Just after his removal, Father Widera was sent to a Catholic rehabilitation facility in New Mexico but did not complete the treatment. In 2002, after being charged with 42 counts of molesting, Father Widera became a fugitive, and he jumped to his death the next year from a hotel room in Mazatlán, Mexico, while being questioned by the police.