

10-9-07 - Four down, how many more to go?

Not the woman I thought I knew

FRANK MICKADEIT, O.C. Register (CA) columnist

One by one they approached the microphones, the three young women. My name is Christina Ruiz, I was abused by Jeffrey Andrade at Mater Dei. ... I'm Elaina Koll. I was abused by Albert Schildknecht at Timothy's in Laguna Niguel ... My name is Sarah Gray. My abuser was Larry Stukenholtz, the choir director at Mater Dei...."

While these victims recited the dishonor roll in front of their lawyers' offices at yesterday morning's press conference, standing off to the side near me was a woman I'd met before. Somewhere. In a totally different context.

"Hi, Frank," she said, sticking out her hand. "I'm (so and so's) friend, remember? We met at ...?"

"Oh, right," I said. "Yes. ... And why are you here?"

She just looked at me, like she kind of expected me to figure it out, and bit her lip and twisted her mouth. "I'm the fourth one," she finally said.

"Oh. ... Ooooh."

She was telling me she was the fourth victim whose case was settled yesterday. Unlike the other three women, she decided to remain anonymous.

"Do (so-and-so) know?" I asked, referring to our mutual friends.

"No."

"Don't worry, I won't say anything. Do any of your friends know?"

"Just a few very close ones I've told. ... It's strange sometimes."

She's lost her faith, lost a good chunk of her youth. For almost three years in the 1990s she was molested by a Catholic school lay teacher.

She told another teacher. The teacher wasn't surprised, apparently because she wasn't the first girl to complain. The teacher told her she just had to deal with it. So she did, for more than two years.

"Was it ever like you were in love with him – or thought you were, anyway?" I asked. "Like, at least in your mind, it was a romance?"

"No. Not at all. Never. I was scared of him. He was abusive."

"Are there times now when you can be, you know, just happy, carefree — happy for happy's sake?"

"Well, sometimes."

You try to look for a bright side when you talk to these women. Unlike some of the others, she didn't have to undergo days of painful depositions by diocesan lawyers. And, unlike some of the others, she doesn't have to watch as her abuser goes on with his life virtually unscathed. Hers is not faring well. "He lives like a bum," she said with some satisfaction. "No job."

She was willing to tell me more, but why put her through what she managed to escape at the hands of the church lawyers? I shook her hand and said, "Maybe I'll see you again at (so-and-so's) ..." She got a little worried look on her face, and I quickly added, "... and we'll just wink knowingly at each other." She laughed and it was a beautiful moment, for me anyway. I hope it was a bright spot in her morning.

Bishop Tod Brown is scheduled to be in court this morning, where his attorneys say he wants to clear his name of contempt-of-court charges. This is to be followed by a press conference at which Brown might talk.

My first question: If your Covenant With the Faithful is about doing everything possible to help the victims heal, and you admit the church's gross culpability (\$6.7 million worth) in these four cases, what in God's name did you gain by subjecting some of the victims to eight days of brutal examination by your attorneys? The type of examination that broke Monsignor John Urell, a grown man with years of being in the public eye, after less than oneday?

How can you possibly say you weren't victimizing these women all over again? And don't – DON'T, FOR GOD'S SAKE – hide behind the lawyers-made-me B.S.

Another question: How are you going to pay for it? Are you going to do like your counterpart in San Diego did last week – ask your priests and parishioners to pony up? How do you think they will react? Are you going to consider selling off some church property, such as the parcel near South Coast Metro area that is earmarked for a new cathedral?

And what about future lawsuits? How many more do you think are in the pipeline? What do you think it will ultimately cost the diocese? And are you going to subject all of those accusers to eight days of deposition examination by your pit bulls before you end up giving in anyway?