

2-6-07 - Judge Says Priest Files Must Be Released

The Morning Call (PA), By GILLIAN FLACCUS, Associated Press Writer

LOS ANGELES -- A judge Tuesday ordered the Roman Catholic Church to release thousands of pages of insurance records and confidential files related to a notorious case of sex abuse by a priest.

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Peter D. Lichtman ordered the Archdiocese of Milwaukee to make public 3,000 pages of insurance records and hundreds of pages from the disciplinary files of former priest Siegfried Widera.

Lichtman wrote that Widera's files prove that "priests with known sexual proclivities have been handed off from location to another without regard to the potential harm to the children of the Church."

The lead plaintiffs' attorney for more than 700 clergy abuse lawsuits pending in Southern California said the order would set a precedent for gaining access to the files of other priests, making it easier to determine when the church knew about molestation charges and how it responded.

"I don't think there's anything that's come out of California that's been this comprehensive and significant," said attorney Raymond Boucher.

A spokeswoman for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee did not immediately return a call Tuesday.

In the 59-page ruling, Lichtman systematically struck down the archdiocese's arguments for keeping the documents private, including claims that they are protected by third-party privacy rights, the First Amendment and the confidential business rights of the archdiocese.

Church attorneys in Los Angeles and San Diego have used similar arguments to keep priest files in hundreds of cases out of the public eye.

Widera was convicted in Wisconsin in 1973 of sexual perversion. The Archdiocese of Milwaukee transferred him to California in 1981. He was facing 42 counts of child molestation in the two states when he died in 2003 after leaping from a hotel balcony in Mexico.