

June 18, 2007 - SANTA BARBARA (CA) Ruling opens door to release of Franciscan friars personnel files
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SANTA BARBARA, Calif.—A judge on Monday ruled that privacy is not enough to conceal the personnel files of six Franciscan priests and brothers accused of sexual abuse, the first step in what could be the release of the secret documents. Franciscan friars last year reached a \$28 million settlement with 25 people who claimed they were sexually abused at a Santa Barbara seminary and mission. The plaintiffs also sought the release of personnel files of six priests and brothers who invoked their privacy rights.

"The rights of privacy must give way to the state's interest in protecting its children from sexual abuse," wrote Superior Court Judge Peter Lichtman.

The Franciscan Friars, Province of Saint Barbara, had no immediate comment.

The plaintiffs' lawyers have argued that the personnel files should be made public because they show the friars knew the priests and brothers were a danger to children but did nothing. The plaintiffs also say the documents could shed light on the warning signs of abuse.

"It's a tremendous victory for the children of the state of California, but it's only the first step in the battle," said attorney Tim Hale, who represents 14 of the plaintiffs.

Last year's settlement centered on allegations that nine priests and brothers sexually abused men and women from 1964 through 1991 while assigned to the now-defunct St. Anthony's Seminary and Old Mission Santa Barbara. The Franciscans conceded that abuse occurred at St. Anthony's after an internal report published in 1993 found 11 priests had abused 34 boys from 1964 to 1987, when the seminary closed for financial reasons.