

Sex-abuse suits jolt N.M. archdiocese

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — For three decades, the Catholic Church sent priests who had been accused of molesting children to this corner of New Mexico.

They were counseled at a treatment center tucked discreetly in the Jemez Mountains. Once released, many of these priests stayed in the area, serving in local parishes.

Now a proliferation of sex-abuse charges has jarred the spiritual core of this traditional Catholic community, spurring so many lawsuits that they threaten to bankrupt the Archdiocese of Santa Fe.

So far, more than 100 complainants have asked for \$50 million from the archdiocese. Church officials acknowledge that complaints have been filed against 45 to 50 priests for alleged sexual abuse of children and

adolescents in the archdiocese over the last 30 years.

The complaints occurred both in urban parishes of the state's larger cities, and at rural missions scattered on ponderosa-covered mountains and sun-baked mesas of New Mexico's rugged countryside.

Several of the suits contend that the archdiocese, which covers two-thirds of New Mexico and has 300,000

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Sex-abuse cases might bankrupt N.M. archdiocese

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faithful, kept silent while allegations of sexual abuse were tucked away in file cabinets. The complaints included everything from an unwanted kiss, to fondling, to oral sex, to sodomy.

In a letter read from pulpits in 91 parishes last month, Santa Fe Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan warned that the pending legal actions threaten to overwhelm archdiocesan finances.

With the church's insurance companies balking at paying court claims, Archbishop Sheehan called on all parishes — many of them in impoverished areas — to tap savings accounts and sell unneeded property in an effort to stave off a Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

"These are drastic measures," said the archbishop, who took over the archdiocese in September. "But the difficulties we face as a church call for these measures."

While the financial crisis poses severe challenges, the schism in faith occasioned by the accusations may have more ruinous consequences in a land where many trace their religious roots to the Spanish conquistadors of the 16th century.

"I feel that decisive action should have been taken years ago," said the Sante Fe Archdiocese chancellor, the Rev. Ron Wolf, who was brought in last year specifically to deal with the abuse issue. "This is going to take at least 10 years to get over. There are many people out there who still hurt."

And there are many who may never come forward, said Hazel Romero, a community activist in Agua Fria, a tiny settlement outside Santa Fe.

"There are a lot of victims and families that I know who are completely shutting their eyes to this," Romero said. "There are people who are willing to testify to help others, but are too ashamed to testify for themselves."

**Complainants
are seeking**

One Paraclete patient, the Rev. Arthur J. Perrault, left the center in 1967 and went on to become the very popular pastor of St. Bernadette parish in Albuquerque.

In the fall of 1992, Father Perrault was accused of having molested children in his parish. Church officials say Father Perrault has fled the country.

The Paraclete Treatment Center, which technically is not a part of the archdiocese, also has been subjected to lawsuits. Last month, the order of priests that runs the clinic paid \$525,000 in an out-of-court settlement with several people who said they were victims of Porter. Porter had been treated at the Paraclete clinic.

Some priests, many parishioners, and three lawsuits also contend that former Archbishop Robert F. Sanchez, a native New Mexican and the nation's first Hispanic archbishop, ignored the accusations because he had his own difficulties.

Last March, after 19 years in charge of the archdiocese, Archbishop Sanchez resigned the leadership role after five women said they had sexual relations with him, some while teenagers. He is currently on retreat at an undisclosed location.

One theory here is that New Mexico's Hispanics were especially vulnerable because of their devotion to their faith.

Since the late 16th century, Catholicism has been the central social structure for New Mexican Hispanics. Ninety-five percent are Catholic.

"Catholicism was the only game in town," said the Rev. Thomas J. Steele, a professor of religious studies at the University of New Mexico. "The tie between religion and culture was always very intimate. To become a Protestant, or anything else, you had to leave the [Hispanic] culture. That is still largely true today."

Traditionally, many Hispanic Catholics

neip owners, but are too ashamed to testify for themselves."

Just as Noah's flood started with a few drops of water, the Santa Fe crisis began with a few whispered allegations.

In the spring of 1991, "a young man who said he had been sexually abused by a priest was referred to me," said Bruce Pasternak, an Albuquerque lawyer who is handling a number of complainants' cases.

Pasternak said he sought to settle the matter quietly with the archdiocese, but the church declined. Pasternak did not file suit in the first case, he said, "but I felt there might be more out there."

In May 1991, another complainant came forward. Pasternak filed suit, and word of the accusations spread across the state.

Bolstered by publicized reports of abuse cases in Minnesota, Louisiana and Massachusetts, Catholics here with tales of priestly abuse began to emerge in numbers.

By December 1991, 17 young men complained in court that they had been abused by Jason Sigler, a former priest who had pleaded guilty in 1983 in Bernalillo County District Court here to sexually abusing a minor.

Next, four people filed suit, saying they had been victimized by James R. Porter, an ex-priest recently sentenced to prison in Massachusetts for molesting 28 children there during the 1960s.

The cases continued to mount until now the archdiocese is defending itself in 41 lawsuits involving more than 100 complainants. Dozens more cases are said to be in preparation for filing soon.

Virtually all of them stem from incidents said to have occurred between 1960 and 1980.

While church officials estimate that as many as 200 youngsters might have been abused by priests over the last three decades, others say the figure is apt to be far higher.

"There are thousands," contends Pasternak, one of a half dozen Albuquerque lawyers bringing the cases. "We get three to five victim calls a day."

Hazel Romero, who left the church after her husband told her he had been sexually molested, said she believed that those who come forward may represent a small percentage of the total who have been abused.

"I would say 75 percent of these people will never admit it," she said. Unusual circumstances may have heightened the scandal here.

The Servants of the Paraclete Treatment Center, a 50-year-old clinic for priests with psychiatric problems including pedophilia, is in nearby Jemez Springs.

Priests from all over the United States were sent to the facility after being accused of molesting children.

"Let's face it, New Mexico is in the middle of nowhere," Pasternak said.

"If you want to store nuclear waste, you do it here. If you want to set off nuclear bombs, you do it here. If you need a place to send pedophiles, well, there's always New Mexico."

Upon leaving the retreat, a number of priests remained in New Mexico.

Complainants are seeking \$50 million from Santa Fe's Archdiocese. The cases have been filed against 45 to 50 priests.

is so saddening."

Pasternak says racism also may have played a role. Though no one has documented the racial breakdown of complainants, Pasternak estimates that 90 percent were Hispanic and most of the accused priests white.

The archdiocese is trying to steady the shaken believers.

Father Wolf, the Santa Fe Archdiocese chancellor, has called on all victims to come forward. Over the last year, he has personally searched out still active priests suspected of misconduct.

The archdiocese has set aside a fund to provide counseling for victims and has made reconciliation and healing a theme of church sermons and activities.

The faith is not easy to restore. Thomas K. Sims, an Albuquerque psychologist and a Catholic, said he was able to be objective while working earlier this year on a commission established by the archdiocese to develop strategies to deal with the problem.

Then, two days before Christmas, an abuse suit was filed against the Rev. Sabine Griego, a former pastor at Queen of Heaven, Sims' parish.

"That is where my kids were," said Sims angrily. "It just keeps getting worse and worse. The archdiocese needs to face the reality of all that has happened."

It also needs cash.

A spokesman for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops said no American diocese or archdiocese ever has declared bankruptcy. The Santa Fe Archdiocese is struggling to avert being the first.

So far the church has raised about \$2 million, said the archdiocesan chancellor, far less than the \$50 million it needs. The church is pushing to get the insurance companies to pay for settlements.

In July, 12 insurers, including St. Paul Fire & Marine and Lloyd's of London, asked a federal court here to relieve them of any responsibility, contending the archdiocese knew of abuse and, through its silence, willfully allowed it. The insurers contended the church failed to report incidents to them immediately, as required by the policies.

The church has filed a countersuit, contending it fulfilled the obligations of the insurance policies.

For many of the faithful, the litigation and the cost are unwelcome burdens.

"It is very hard to talk about," said Maria Leyba, as she visited Santuario de Chimayo, a 178-year-old church that is the site of Easter pilgrimages and is revered as a place of healing.

"Many of us are poor, and we have very little to give. I personally don't think we should have to pay for this."

largely true today." Traditionally, many Hispanic Catholics have a fervent respect for priests.

"These priests have been present in the lives of these people at the most important times," said Father Steele. "At the time of birth and marriage and death and illness. This is where real trust is built, and that is why it

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