

Diocese accused of delay in probing priest's alleged abuse

By Norman D. Williams and Sam Stanton Bee Staff Writers

Sacramento's Catholic Diocese has been accused of reacting slowly to complaints of child molestation by a priest involved in sexual misconduct in the past, according to internal church documents made public Wednesday.

Downplaying the significance of the written reports, the diocese denied there had

been any delays in responding to the child molestation complaint or other reports of misconduct by its clergy. A spokesman also said a list of 24 cases of alleged misconduct published this week overstates the problem the diocese faces with renegade priests.

However, it was also learned from knowledgeable sources Wednesday that the diocese, in another case of alleged sexual misconduct, placed the Rev. Thomas Dermody on administrative leave within the past few days, pending a review of complaints.

Dermody is the brother of the Rev. Michael Dermody, who was pastor in Orland until 1989, when he was placed on leave and sent to a counseling center in Suitland, Md., after allegations surfaced that he had engaged in sexual misconduct with several parishioners. The diocese and Michael Dermody are being sued by three women from the Glenn County community who say they were drawn into sexual relationships by the priest.

The parish where Thomas Dermody served

was not disclosed, nor were the specifics of the complaint.

In addition, the diocese is in the midst of an investigation into rumors of widespread sexual misconduct by clergy in the Chico area, according to documents and sources.

Internal church documents released in a \$12.5 million lawsuit against the diocese, which is now being heard in Sacramento Superior Court, show that its attorneys have expressed concern about liability for the actions of errant clergy.

And concerns about reported misconduct in the Chico area were so strong that the diocese's Sensitive Issues Committee met last April and discussed hiring a "very good and very discreet" private attorney to look into them, one confidential memo indicated.

"There were concerns raised regarding the number and frequency of reported and rumored accounts of impropriety by priests in the Chico area," the memo stated. "Counsel-

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and even a Lutheran minister in the area have reported a disproportionate number of clients who reported sexual misconduct on the part of some priests residing in the area over the years.

"While some of the priests are no longer in the area, it cannot be said with certainty that the problem no longer exists."

Louis Desmond, the attorney for the Sacramento diocese, which oversees Catholic parishes in Northern California along with some 240 priests, declined to comment on the issues involving Chico, saying it is a pending investigation. There was no explanation of why, when or how many priests were transferred.

The Michael Dermody case is the subject of the civil suit against the diocese, with three women claiming that church officials are responsible for the actions of their priests and that the diocese should pay damages for the psychological damage inflicted by Dermody's actions. A fourth woman who initially joined the suit has settled her claim.

"After admitting to sexual misconduct with the women, Dermody was placed in counseling in Maryland, according to church officials. The diocese contends it is not responsible for the priest's conduct because it took place outside his role as a cleric."

On Wednesday, diocese lawyers finally opened their case in the four-week-long trial by seeking to debunk the women's injury claims. Testimony by Dr. Daniel Edwards, a clinical psychologist teaching at the University of California, Davis, School of Medicine, disputed the plaintiffs' claims that they were unwilling participants in the sexual relationships with Michael Dermody.

"She was in a relationship that she wanted, although it did have some bad points," Edwards said of one of the women. When asked why the women waited so long to report the incidents, he answered, "I think it was bad judgment."

Of another victim, he said, "In the first encounter, she seemed to be a very active participant," noting that the woman went back to Dermody and had sex with him more than once within the next few days.

Edwards examined the women on the defense's behalf after the lawsuit was filed and indicated that, although they had many problems, Dermody was not the sole cause. The women have claimed to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental ills since their encounters with Dermody, but Edwards disputed most of the diagnoses by the plaintiffs' experts.

"I didn't find any of them to have that condition," he said of the stress disorder. He also discounted assertions by the plaintiffs' experts that the women were the victims of a type of sexual domination or enslavement.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs now say the Dermody case and others they have uncovered in the diocese are "just the tip of the iceberg" and that since the trial began, they have been inundated with telephone calls from other parishioners wanting to report misconduct.

"There have been far too many incidents in this diocese," attorney Randall J. Shanks said after Wednesday's court session. "How many red flags do they have to have until they start doing something?"

To bolster their case, the attorneys have sought evidence that the diocese has moved slowly in policing such cases of misconduct, and heavily edited church documents placed into evidence on Wednesday illustrate some of the problems the attorneys say exist.

In a case that allegedly took place over Christmas, for instance, a Sacramento woman attempted to report to the diocese that a priest had improperly touched her 6-year-old daughter on the evening of Dec. 23 as he was delivering gifts to the family.

could not discuss the case in detail because of the possibility of further legal action, but he denied that the diocese had moved slowly in responding to that matter or any others.

Desmond said that despite what the church document indicated, the woman had called the chancery on Christmas Eve after it had closed and that the absence of many workers during the holidays led to the lack of immediate action.

He said the woman reported the matter to another priest, who contacted the diocese about it on Jan. 8, after which officials began an immediate investigation of the priest. By then, the priest had left for Mexico on a previously scheduled vacation, and he has not returned.

Documents show the priest earlier had been ordered to seek counseling because of his contact with the young woman at the motel, and that Bishop Francis Quinn had sent him letters warning him that his failure to complete counseling could end his career.

The documents also indicate that Quinn had high hopes that the priest's problems were behind him at that time. "It is necessary that (name omitted) be aware of this reality (of punishment), but I do not want to crush his spirits," Quinn wrote in a handwritten postscript on one document. "I know he is trying."

Quinn testified earlier this week in the Michael Dermody case and has said that his diocese responded swiftly to complaints about sexual misconduct by some clergy.

In two other cases that have come to light during the trial, priests accused of misconduct have returned to their homeland of Mexico and found work in the church there.

Despite the urging of the diocese that they return to face scrutiny in the cases, they have refused to do so, documents indicated.

STORE HOURS:
DAILY 8-8
SAT. 8-6
SUN. 9-6

ALL COLEMAN PRODUCTS 20% OFF

SAVING
IS PROUD TO AN
OUR LARGE \$
FISHING, MARIN
WILL

Tru HARD

ALL SLEEPING BAGS 20% OFF

OUR LOW DISCOUNTED

The priest, whose name was not revealed, had been disciplined by the diocese earlier for intimate contact with a young woman in a motel room in 1989, according to an internal church document. The woman's age was not revealed, but she reportedly was not a minor.

However, when the mother tried to report the alleged contact with her daughter, her complaints were ignored until she became frustrated and contacted the police, the memo indicates.

The woman's 12-year-old daughter later reported that she, also, had been fondled by the man in an incident two years earlier.

The priest, who was a family friend and not the woman's pastor, has denied the allegations and currently is in Mexico.

Diocese attorney Desmond said he

