

Jesuit priests accused of sex abuse in Alaska

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SEATTLE -- The Jesuit order has been sued by 43 Alaska Natives who say they were sexually abused as children, and mounting evidence shows that known pedophile priests were sent to the Fairbanks, Alaska, Diocese for decades, a lawyer said Wednesday.

Jesuit institutions named as defendants include the Society of Jesus in Rome; the Oregon Province of the Catholic order, which covers Washington, Oregon, Alaska, Idaho and Montana; the Pioneer Educational Society, the province's educational arm and parent institution of Seattle University and Gonzaga University in Spokane, and the Alaska branch of the order.

Individual defendants are the Rev. Adolfo Nicolas, the order's superior general; the Rev. Stephen V. Sundborg, provincial, or head of the Jesuit province, from 1990-96 and president of Seattle University since July 1997; an aging Jesuit priest, the Rev. Henry G. Hargreaves; Anton Smario and 100 people whose names are unknown to plaintiffs.

Smario is listed in the lawsuit "at all times relevant" as a Franciscan monk of the third order and a member of the Friars of Saint Francis. He was also listed in a Fairbanks Diocese 1968 directory as a "lay volunteer," the lawsuit said.

The claims of abuse range from fondling to child rape decades ago in Nulato, Hooper Bay, Stebbins, Chevak, Mountain Village, Nunam Iqua and St. Michael, Alaska.

Sundborg and the Very Rev. Patrick J. Lee, head of the Oregon province, denied that they knew of sexual wrongdoing or were involved in covering up wrongdoing by priests in Alaska, although the order has paid millions of dollars in recent years to settle sexual abuse claims in Alaska.

Faced with rising abuse lawsuits, the Fairbanks diocese filed for bankruptcy protection in March.

Lawsuits are also being prepared on behalf of 60 other men and women accusing Jesuits in remote northern Alaska outposts of abusing those people when they were children and teenagers from the late 1940s through 2001, said Kenneth S. Roosa, a lawyer from Anchorage, Alaska.

During that time, according to the lawsuit filed Tuesday by Roosa in Superior Court in Bethel, Alaska, "Native villages in the state of Alaska were essentially a 'dumping ground' for Jesuit priests unsuited to serve anywhere else in the Jesuit organization."

An investigator in those and similar cases in Alaska, Patrick J. Wall of Newport Beach, Calif., said 28 Jesuit priests accused of sexual misconduct against young parishioners in previously resolved lawsuits, pending lawsuits and others which have yet to be filed were sent to the Fairbanks Diocese from 10 other provinces, including four overseas.

Operating in impoverished hamlets far from police agencies and reachable only by small aircraft, dogsleds and in some cases boats, and in a diocese where the bishop also was a Jesuit, those priests were the ultimate local authority, Roosa said.

"It was a pedophile's paradise," he said.

In a statement issued through a provincial spokesman, Lee wrote that he had never seen evidence that the order hid problem priests in Alaska.

"Jesuits requested to be assigned to this mission," he wrote. "It was seen as a very challenging place to go but one which attracted Jesuits who had a deep desire to spread the gospel."

Plaintiffs contend that Sundborg had access to confidential dossiers known as "hell files" on misconduct by priests and should have known that Hargreaves, now believed to be living in a Jesuit community in Spokane, had abused children.

Hargreaves is accused in the lawsuit of molesting a boy in 1991, the only abuse that was cited during Sundborg's tenure as provincial.

Jesuit officials have denied the existence of "hell files."

"There is such a thing as intentional ignorance," Roosa said.

Sundborg was named as a defendant mainly because he is the only living former head of the Oregon province, Roosa said.

"The allegations brought against me are false. I firmly deny them," Sundborg wrote in a statement posted on the university's Web site. "The complaint filed by the plaintiffs' lawyers represents an unprincipled and irresponsible attack on my reputation."

"Let me be clear - my commitment to justice and reconciliation for all victims remains steadfast. The sexual abuse by Catholic priests is one of the most shameful episodes in the history of our church. I will continue to work toward the goal of bringing healing to all victims."

On a sidewalk outside the main entrance to Seattle U., Flo Kenney, 70, of Juneau, Alaska, told reporters on Wednesday that she was abused about six decades ago after confiding in a now-deceased priest because she was so depressed at being berated and beaten by nuns at a boarding school that she had quit eating and talking and "I was afraid I was becoming a ghost."

Rena R. Abouchuk and Alphonsus Abouchuk, a brother and sister who live in Kelso, Wash., said they were abused by different priests and that six of their cousins committed suicide as youngsters after being abused.

Rena Abouchuk fought back tears as she read a letter to Smario, who Roosa said now lives in Concord, Calif., accusing him of touching her and other girls "in ways that I will never forget" and of other abuse starting when she was 7 in 1975.

"You made us touch you," she continued. "You did so many evil things to children ... and lived your life like you did nothing wrong."

Smario's telephone number is unlisted; the Jesuits said they would provide no comment beyond their prepared statements.

Alphonsus Abouchuk said he attempted suicide in 1980 and was homeless and alcoholic for a time but fought his way to sobriety and is now employed and owns a home.

http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/6420ap_wa_alaska_priest_lawsuit.html