

Published on Wednesday, January 9, 2008

Diocese settles four sex abuse lawsuits for \$200,000

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YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC



BRIAN FITZGERALD/Yakima Herald-Republic file

At a Feb. 16, 2005 news conference, Mary Smith, left, supports her sister, Rose Lamey of Seattle, as Lamey speaks to reporters before attempting to serve papers on the Catholic Diocese of Yakima for her lawsuit over sexual abuse she says she suffered at the hands of a Yakima-area priest in the 1960s.

The Catholic Diocese of Yakima has paid \$200,000 to settle lawsuits brought by four women who alleged that they were sexually abused when they were children in the 1960s by a now-deceased Toppenish priest.

As part of the settlement, Bishop Carlos Sevilla, who was not in office at the time, apologized to the women in personal letters, according to a news release from the diocese. The diocese announced the settlement Tuesday.

"I can assure you that I am personally committed to the safety and well-being of all the people of the Diocese of Yakima entrusted to my pastoral care, particularly children and youth," Sevilla said in the apology letters.

Including the current settlement, the Yakima diocese now has paid roughly \$1.25 million to resolve claims involving seven priests.

But the lead lawyer for the plaintiffs blasted the diocese for denying liability in the matter. He

called that position appalling given the lack of a background check for the priest, the Rev. Michael Simpson, and the diocese's knowledge at the time that the native of Ireland had a drinking problem.

"He was able to grab children -- our clients and probably others -- and rape them on the desk in his rectory office and sexually assault them with the handles of hairbrushes. The facts of these cases are ugly and outrageous," Seattle attorney Tim Kosnoff said.

The lawsuits identify the plaintiffs only by their initials: R.L, M.S., F.C. and M.H.

But Rose Lamey of the Seattle area, who grew up in the Zillah area, publicly came forward at a 2005 news conference announcing a lawsuit over Simpson's conduct. With her at the news conference were Lamey's sister, Mary Yates Smith of Spokane, and Fran Crabtree Cuhtahlatah of Ellensburg, who said they also were victimized by Simpson.

Simpson died in Ireland in 1977. The diocese said extensive investigation showed that the diocese did not learn of the abuse claims until one of the plaintiffs' sisters wrote a letter to Sevilla in 2004.

The lawsuits were filed in 2005 and 2006. The women decided to come forward after other accounts of abuse by priests began spreading across the country, Kosnoff said.

He said the settlement amounts -- \$50,000 per plaintiff, minus legal costs -- were smaller than in many other cases. He attributed that to the age of the case and the unavailability of witnesses, including Simpson's supervisor, who died before he could be deposed.

Both sides said legal costs associated with going to trial would have been high, and there would have been uncertainty about the outcome.

Sevilla's chief of staff, the Rev. Robert Siler, said the diocese felt it had a strong defense, noting that no one except the dead priest and his accusers know what happened.

"On the other hand, if these women were abused, we're very sorry for it," Siler said. "It just seems that a settlement at this time is a way to help them and limit our potential liability."

Kosnoff countered that the church knew that Simpson was a chronic alcoholic who had no business being around children. Simpson had been required to sign a rare sobriety oath before taking on his duties in the diocese, Kosnoff said.

As the parish priest at St. Aloysius Catholic Church in Toppenish, Simpson enticed his victims into his rectory office, where he committed what would amount to first-degree rape and molestation if the incidents were charged as crimes, Kosnoff said.

In addition to the settlement, the diocese paid \$20,000 for Lamey to receive counseling through June 2007. Kosnoff said he expected the plaintiffs to pursue additional counseling funded by

the settlement.

The priest abuse saga is not over yet for the Yakima diocese.

Last January, a man who now lives in Tukwila filed a lawsuit claiming abuse by two now-deceased priests. The man, identified only by the initials J.K., alleges that the abuse started in the 1960s when he was a 14-year-old student at St. Peter the Apostle Seminary in Cowiche, which has since been closed.

The man's attorney, Mary Fleck of Seattle, said she filed a request Tuesday for a jury trial in Yakima County Superior Court. Fleck said the diocese has not proposed settling that case. "They haven't made any overtures to us. I don't know what they're thinking," Fleck said.

In a previously unpublicized lawsuit, a woman named Rosa Flores-Winder alleged that a Sunnyside priest touched her inappropriately when she was about 9 years old in the 1960s. His contact with her included home visits, according to the lawsuit, which was filed in April in Yakima County Superior Court.

But Siler, the diocese spokesman, said the church doesn't have information that the man identified in the lawsuit was a priest or deacon. He may have been a parishioner, and the diocese is waiting for more information, Siler said.

Flores-Winder's Seattle attorney did not return a call Tuesday afternoon.

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