Sins of the Fathers
A Honolulu bishop is accused of sex abuse in a federal lawsuit as Catholic scandals keep spreading

By RICHARD N. OSTLING

Without doubt it is the worst wave of moral scandals ever to beset Roman Catholicism in North America. Dozens upon dozens of priests have been accused of sexually abusing underage boys. Cases have erupted in most U.S. states and two Canadian provinces since the 1985 conviction of Louisiana's Father Gilbert Gauthe, who had molested 35 youths. So widespread are the cases that by one informed estimate, Catholic institutions have paid $300 million in settlements-with no end in sight. "We could be sued out of existence," says Notre Dame philosophy professor Ralph McInerny.

Worse than the loss of money are the feeling of betrayal and the erosion of esteem for priests among many parishioners. The potential for such spiritual devastation escalated considerably last week, as a federal civil lawsuit was filed against Honolulu bishop Joseph A. Ferrario, 65, the first member of the U.S. hierarchy to face a sex-abuse suit. A spokesman for the bishop said in response, "These are old allegations, made by the same people. The bishop has denied them every time."

The bishop's accuser is David Figueroa, 32, a cook living in Florida who has tested HIV-positive. He first made charges against Ferrario anonymously in 1989 and went public on Geraldo Rivera's TV show last year. Now, he has decided to try to make his charges stick, in detail and under oath. "No amount of money will make up for what he's taken from me," says Figueroa. "He used me. He ruined my life."

Figueroa's sordid account runs as follows. Beginning in kindergarten at St. Anthony's church in Kailua, Hawaii, he was continually molested by the parish priest. When the boy was in his teens, the priest died, but Ferrario, his successor, continued the sex abuse for years, paying Figueroa for odd jobs in return. Ferrario also aided Figueroa in quitting high school just before graduation and joining the gay community in San Francisco. Figueroa alleges that the sexual entanglement continued even after Ferrario became a bishop, with trysts at church residences in Honolulu and Menlo Park, Calif. Figueroa's lawyers claim other witnesses will corroborate his version of the bishop's conduct.

Last week three Canadian scandals also made news. A judge in Newfoundland sentenced Edward English of the Christian Brothers to 12 years in prison, declaring, "You are a disgrace to the order and to humanity." A separate scandal involves six present and former diocesan priests in Newfoundland. Also last week, a trial was ordered in the first of the abuse cases involving 19 Christian Brothers at a school in Alfred, Ont. One attorney in the Hawaii suit, Jeffrey R. Anderson of St. Paul, has become a specialist in civil damage suits involving alleged priestly sex abuse and is pursuing more than 100 cases at present. Last December he won the biggest award to date, $3.5 million (reduced to $1.04 million on appeal) in the case of Father Thomas Adamson. Allegations against Adamson spanned 22 years, but two Catholic dioceses kept shuffling him into new assignments.

Such developments have thrown a harsh spotlight on the performance of Catholic leadership. Says Jason Berry, the freelance journalist who broke the Louisiana story and is completing a book on the outbreak of clerical scandals: "The real shock was that a priest could be capable of molesting children but the mandac-