

# Serving Rome

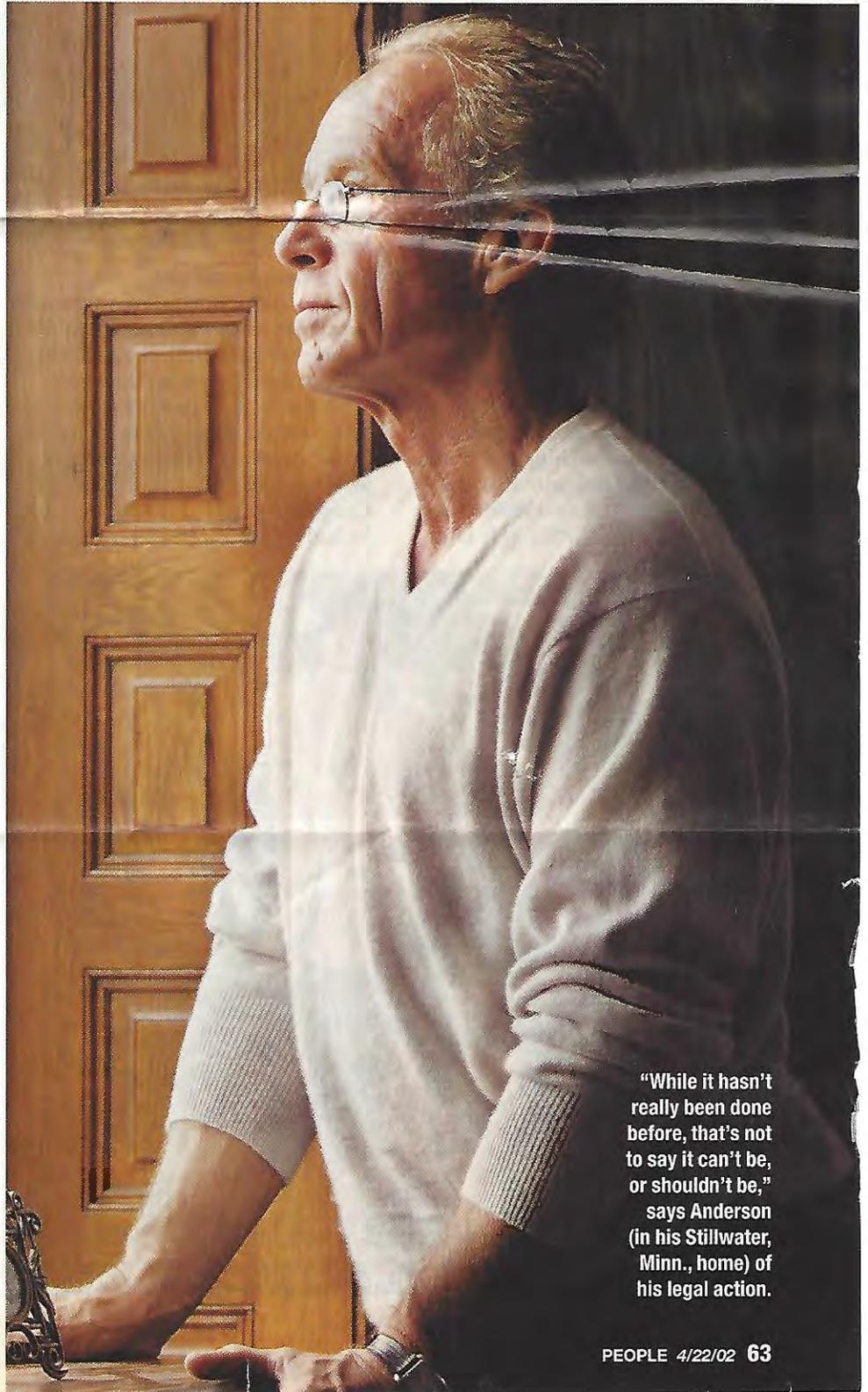
Lawyer Jeffrey Anderson takes his case to the top, suing the Vatican for not removing predator priests



Anderson says that he will not attempt to depose the Pope, who is in poor health.

Filled with enough expensive antiques to give any *Masterpiece Theatre* parlor a run for its money, Jeffrey Anderson's office in St. Paul is a testament to his prowess as an attorney. But on one wall, Anderson proudly displays what he considers the true signs of his influence: framed samples of hate mail he has received over the years. One screed brands him the "anti-christ." Another dismisses him as a "bigoted shyster lawyer." Says Anderson dryly: "I like stuff that has meaning to me."

For nearly 20 years, reveling in ire and controversy, Anderson, 54, has been one of the most aggressive lawyers battling the Catholic Church over the issue of predator priests. He has represented more than 400 alleged victims of molestation and won more than \$60 million in settlements from various archdioceses. Now, as the world waits to see how the Church will respond to the growing outcry, Anderson has decided to take his fight to the top. Last month, using the RICO statutes—generally employed against organized crime—he brought suit against a number of bishops in the United States, alleging a pattern of criminal wrongdoing. Then, in a more audacious move, he filed suit in federal court in Portland, Ore., and state court in Florida naming the Vatican as a defendant in what could be a landmark civil action involving the issue of Church complicity in the harboring of clergy accused of sexual abuse. "These are powerful institutions he's up against," says Robert Oliphant, a professor at William Mitchell College of Law in

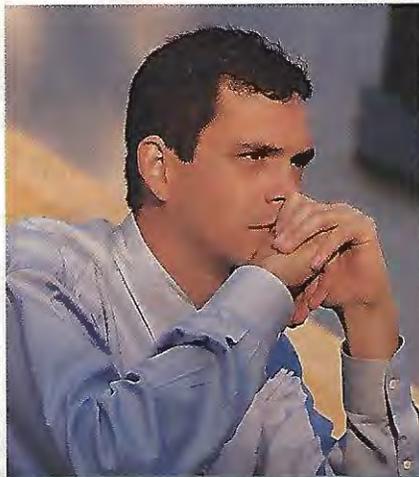


"While it hasn't really been done before, that's not to say it can't be, or shouldn't be," says Anderson (in his Stillwater, Minn., home) of his legal action.

St. Paul. "He's withstood pressure, and that's a credit to any lawyer."

Anderson's crusade has a personal element as well. Helping to stoke his outrage is the fact that his own daughter Amy, now 28, was molested at age 8 by a therapist who also happened to be a former priest. In 1992, at age 18, Amy told her dad about the incident with the therapist, who by then had served a year in jail on an unrelated molestation charge. "It was very painful," says Anderson. "I came to feel like I didn't protect her, and to this day I understand how parents of victims blame themselves." As Amy tells it, that empathy is what gives her father his edge and fuels his zeal. "My pain is what makes him keep going," she says.

Anderson found his calling almost by accident. He grew up the middle of three kids in the affluent Minneapolis suburb of Edina and went on to graduate from the University of Minnesota. By his early 20s he was a self-described hippie. He was also married to first wife Patricia, with whom he had two children, Matt, now 35, and Amy. (He later



JAN SONNENMARI/UCR/OBA

"I have suffered, but so have a lot of people," says plaintiff Rick Gomez.

had four more kids with two women, including three with present wife Julie, 40, an innkeeper.) Seeking to support his family, at age 25 he eventually enrolled in a night law school in St. Paul, and after graduation started a poverty-law practice.

His personal turning point came in 1983, when he took the case of Greg Riedle, then 19, who claimed he had been molested by a Catholic

priest in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. The Church had rarely, if ever, been sued on those grounds before, and Anderson concedes that his first stab at bringing the case to court was "inept." Still, he says, the archdiocese offered to settle for \$500,000, which Riedle turned down. The ensuing publicity over the court filing brought scores of other alleged victims to Anderson. "I had people swarming into my office, heartbroken, bewildered, confused, afraid and living in secrecy," he says. (Riedle settled for just over \$1 million.) In the following years, even as Amy's pain was still a secret, Anderson focused more and more on sexual abuse cases involving the Church. "I work to channel my anger into something constructive," he says. "I don't let it consume me; I only let it motivate me."

Whether challenging the Vatican itself is a mark of righteousness—or folly—is still an open question. The case itself sounds like so many others: Rick Gomez, 28, a software consultant in Los Angeles, contends that as a 14-year-old at a Catholic school in Tampa he was abused by then Brother William Burke. But Gomez and Anderson are determined to hold the Vatican accountable for not doing enough to stop the predators. "This is a lot bigger than what happened to me," says Gomez. The trouble is that as a sovereign entity, the Holy See generally enjoys immunity from such civil actions. Andrew Eisenzimmer, an attorney who has represented the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, believes that Anderson has launched this latest attack mostly for the publicity. "He knows there is virtually no chance the case is going to succeed," says Eisenzimmer, who nevertheless regards Anderson as an exceptionally able lawyer.

The long odds don't bother Anderson. "It was something that had to be done," he says of his suit. Nor is he troubled by the thought of more hate mail. "I know," he says, "I'm going to take heat."

- Bill Hewitt
- Lauren Comander in St. Paul and Maureen Harrington in Los Angeles



There is a "dark underbelly" to the Church, says Anderson (with wife Julie and his kids, clockwise from rear, Lindsey, 19; Matt; Amy; twins Casey and Drew, 9; and Darrow, 11).