

Priest gets probation in molest case

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BARSTOW — A Roman Catholic priest who pleaded no contest March 13 to a misdemeanor charge of molesting a 13-year-old boy was placed on three years' probation Monday.

Municipal Court Judge James Dorr also ordered the Rev. Gustavo Benson, 41, former pastor of Joseph's Catholic Church here, continue to receive counseling, psychological care, and not to associate with the victim.

The priest also was ordered to register as a sex offender.

Benson, who appeared in court with Victorville attorney Larry Freeman, made no comment when Dorr imposed the sentence.

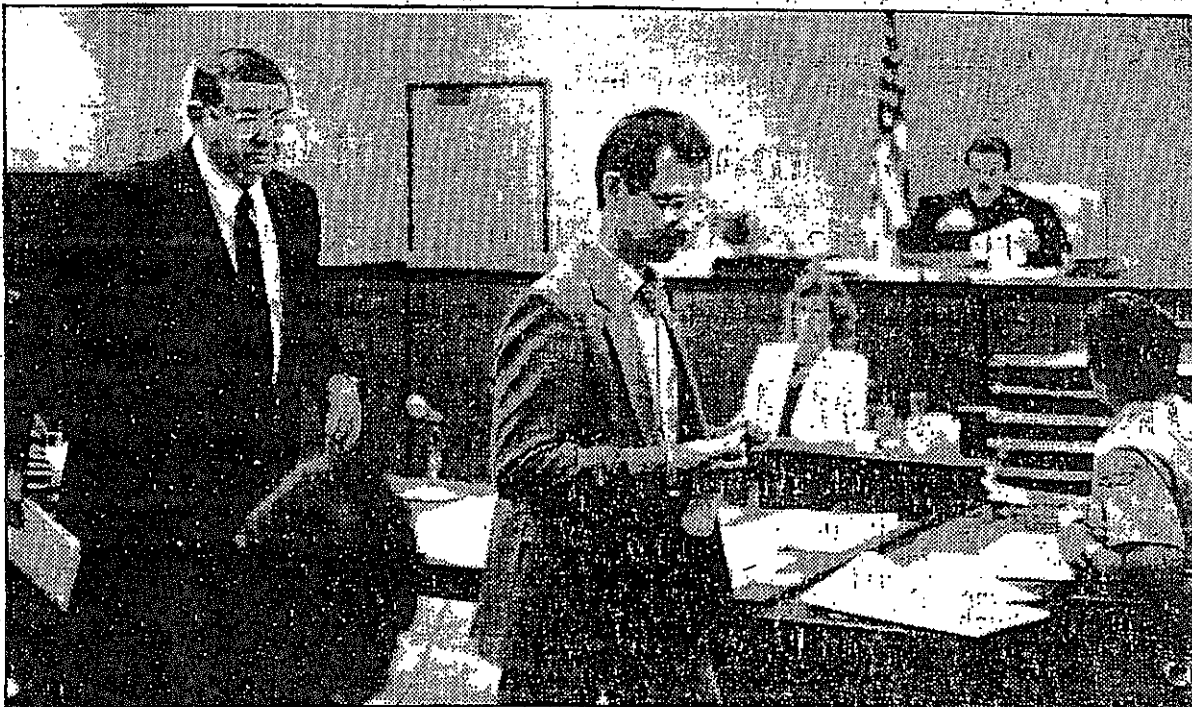
The priest has been in a church-sponsored rehabilitation and counseling program in New Mexico since shortly after his arrest here last Jan. 15. He will continue to undergo counseling, possibly until January.

As part of a plea bargain, Dorr dismissed a second count of child molestation and two counts of contributing to the delinquency of minors. All were misdemeanors.

The district attorney's office did not recommend a jail sentence.

Calling for leniency, Deputy District Attorney Kay Neshat said Benson had assumed responsibility for his actions and entered a contest plea "to put the proceedings to a close and to spare youngsters the ordeal of a trial."

She added, "On behalf of the victims and their families, I urge you to put Father Benson on pro-



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AFTER SENTENCING: The Rev. Gustavo Benson, center, walks from a Barstow courtroom Monday with his attorney, Larry Freeman. At rear is Municipal Court Judge James Dorr. The priest received three years' probation after pleading no contest to a molestation charge.

bation. The families bear no ill feelings but recognize that Father Benson has serious problems."

Neshat told the court, "They've asked ... he receive counseling to avoid future problems ... and to avoid additional trauma. The victims don't want him to spend time in custody. They want him to get help."

Freeman said Benson had cooperated with investigators from the start.

"He would never allow the case to go to trial," the attorney said. "He wouldn't allow the children to go through a trial."

Freeman said Benson, who was ordained in 1972 and had been assigned as St. Joseph's parish priest since January 1985, will no longer continue as a parish priest and will not work with young children.

A part of the judge's order requires Benson not to associate with persons under age 18 unless another adult is present.

Benson came to Barstow from Colton, where he was a pastor for six years.

Before sentencing Benson, Dorr told the priest his conduct normally would require a jail term.

But the judge added, "The program you now are in (in New Mexico) is in a great sense confinement. You cannot leave there until the church determines you are ready to return to society."

Dorr said the interests of society also are being served by Benson's participation in the 18-month intensive rehabilitation and therapeutic program that Neshat said is being conducted by a Roman Catholic order, the Servants of the

Paraclete.

"I expect you to complete program," Dorr told Benson.

Justifying probation, the judge said he also was considering interests and desires of the victims and their families.

"The victims ask that you be placed in jail and don't let you to be punished directly," Dorr said. "They don't want to heighten the trauma of the children."

After his arrest Jan. 15, Benson pleaded innocent to two counts of child molestation and two counts of contributing to the delinquency of minors.

The priest was charged with molesting two 13-year-old boys at his Barstow home and his Forest Falls cabin. He also was accused of giving beer and coolers to two boys, 14 and 15, at his Barstow home and the cab-