

**THIRD JUDICIAL DISTRICT  
STATE OF NEW MEXICO  
COUNTY OF DONA ANA**

FILED  
3rd JUDICIAL DISTRICT COURT  
Dona Ana County  
7/14/2025 3:19 PM  
BERNICE A. RAMOS  
CLERK OF THE COURT  
Claudine Bernal

JOHN DOE 207,

Plaintiff,

vs.

D-307-CV-2025-01896

Martin, James T.

ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF LAS CRUCES, and  
ST. ELEANOR PARISH, INC.

Defendants.

**COMPLAINT FOR DAMAGES ARISING FROM CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE**

Plaintiff John Doe 207 was sexually abused as a child by a Catholic priest named Fr. Bernard Bissonnette. Defendant Roman Catholic Diocese of Las Cruces and its bishop Ricardo Ramirez were aware of Fr. Bissonnette's proclivity to sexually abuse children years before Fr. Bissonnette sexually abused Plaintiff and other children residing in the Hondo River Valley. Fr. Bissonnette exploited his power and authority as a Catholic priest to manipulate and sexually abuse Plaintiff. After suffering in silence for decades, Plaintiff now brings his legal claims in pursuit of transparency and accountability.

**PARTIES, JURISDICTION, AND VENUE**

1. At the time he was sexually abused and assaulted by Defendants' Priest, Plaintiff resided in Ruidoso, New Mexico. Plaintiff currently resides in Ruidoso, Lincoln County, New Mexico.

2. At all times relevant to this Complaint, Defendant Roman Catholic Diocese of Las Cruces (hereinafter "the Diocese" or "RCDLC") was a New Mexico nonprofit corporation with its principal place of business in Doña Ana County, New Mexico, and which at all times material to

this Complaint operated facilities in southern and western New Mexico, including Lincoln County, New Mexico. RCDLC may be served with process by serving its registered agent, Kathryn Brack Morrow, Jr., 1730 Tierra de Mesilla, Ste. 4, Las Cruces, New Mexico 88005, or an authorized officer, a managing or a general agent therein.

3. St. Eleanor Parish, Inc. is a legal entity separate from the Diocese, with its primary place of business located in Lincoln County, New Mexico. St. Eleanor Parish, Inc. is a New Mexico nonprofit corporation with its principal place of business in Lincoln County, New Mexico. St. Eleanor Parish, Inc. may be served with process by serving its registered agent, Kathryn Brack Morrow, Jr., 1730 Tierra de Mesilla, Ste. 4, Las Cruces, New Mexico 88005, or an authorized officer, a managing or a general agent therein.

4. The acts and omissions alleged herein occurred in Ruidoso, Lincoln County, New Mexico.

5. Prior to its separate incorporation under New Mexico civil law, Defendant St. Eleanor Parish, Inc. was considered a parish under Catholic Canon Law.

6. Defendant St. Eleanor Parish, Inc. is the successor in interest to St. Eleanor Parish, and St. Eleanor Parish is the predecessor in interest to Defendant St. Eleanor Parish, Inc.

7. Under Catholic Canon Law and/or New Mexico law, and at the time of the events underlying this Complaint, parishes (including St. Eleanor Parish) were separate administrative entities from the administrative entity of the diocese in which they reside and function.

8. Under Catholic Canon Law and/or New Mexico law, and at the time of the events underlying this Complaint, St. Eleanor Parish was an administrative entity separate from the administrative entity of the RCDLC.

9. Under Catholic Canon Law and/or New Mexico law, and at the time of the events underlying this Complaint, St. Eleanor Parish held funds separate from the RCDLC, held property separate from the RCDLC, hired and paid personnel separate from the RCDLC, and made supervisory decisions separate from the RCDLC.

10. Under Catholic Canon Law and/or New Mexico law, and at the time of the events underlying this Complaint, Fr. Bernard Bissonnette was a pastor/administrator of St. Eleanor Parish.

11. Jurisdiction and venue are proper with this Court.

### **FACTS**

12. The allegations of the preceding and succeeding paragraphs are incorporated herein by this reference.

13. Plaintiff was born in 1974.

14. Plaintiff was a victim of childhood sexual abuse perpetrated by a priest.

15. The sexual abuse of Plaintiff occurred on the physical premises of St. Eleanor Parish.

16. The priest who abused Plaintiff was Fr. Bernard Bissonnette (“Defendants’ Priest”). At the time he sexually abused Plaintiff, Defendants’ Priest was a pastor/administrator of St. Eleanor Parish.

17. Fr. Bissonnette was originally sent to New Mexico by the Diocese of Norwich in approximately 1963 due to allegations that he had sexually abused children in Connecticut.

18. During his time in New Mexico, Fr. Bissonnette was implicated in the sexual abuse of children on multiple additional occasions.

19. During his time in New Mexico, Fr. Bissonnette was repeatedly ordered to undergo treatment with the Servants of the Paraclete in Jemez Springs and other treatment centers around the United States due to ongoing allegations of sexual abuse of children in New Mexico.

20. During his time in New Mexico, Fr. Bissonnette sexually abused over thirty (30) boys.

21. The Diocese of Las Cruces was made explicitly aware of Fr. Bissonnette's sexual abuse of minors at St. Eleanor's Parish in Ruidoso in 1983.

22. Fr. Bissonnette abused Plaintiff in approximately 1984, when Plaintiff was approximately 10 years old.

23. The sexual abuse occurred on multiple occasions during overnight stays at the rectory of St. Eleanor's Parish which Fr. Bissonnette referred to as "lock-ins."

24. Plaintiff was very scared and confused by the sexual abuse. He did not know what to do. He was terrified to tell anyone what had happened.

25. Plaintiff began drinking alcohol and consuming drugs at a young age in an attempt forget what had happened. He became a heavy drinker and became addicted to drugs.

26. The sexual abuse of Plaintiff by Defendants' Priest caused Plaintiff emotional, psychological and physical harm.

27. Plaintiff has only recently begun to understand the nature of the sexual abuse he suffered, and the fact that he sustained severe emotional, psychological and physical injuries as a result of the childhood sexual abuse by Defendants' Priest.

28. Defendants' Priest used his status and substantial power as a priest to isolate Plaintiff for sexual abuse.

29. RCDLC imbued Defendants' Priest with the powers and authorities of his priesthood.

30. In addition or in the alternative, St. Eleanor Parish imbued Defendants' Priest with the powers and authorities of his priesthood.

31. At all times material to this Complaint, and according to the internal policies and procedures of the Catholic Church and the Diocese, Defendants' Priest was an employee of and under the control of the Diocese and/or Parish and acted within an agency relationship with the Diocese and/or Parish (while providing guidance, direction, counseling, confessional response, and psychological assistance to his parishioners, including Plaintiff).

32. The Defendants imbued their priests (including Defendants' Priest) with substantial power over the lives of their vulnerable parishioners. Plaintiff was taught to put complete trust in priests and to believe that priests had divine power and authority over him.

33. According to the internal policies and procedures of the Catholic Church and the Diocese, the Diocese (through its Bishop) had (and currently has) the power to allow, disallow, and control the service of any clergy within the geographical jurisdiction of the Diocese.

34. Plaintiff's parents trusted that Plaintiff would be safe from sexual predation while in the care and custody of priests like Defendants' Priest.

35. Plaintiff's parents only allowed Plaintiff to spend time alone with Defendants' Priest because Defendants' Priest's status as a priest created a special relationship of deep trust.

36. But for the fact that Defendants' Priest was a priest, Plaintiff's parents would never have sent Plaintiff to sleep overnight at the rectory with Defendants' Priest.

37. Defendants' Priest's knowledge of the deference to priests ingrained in Catholic children by their upbringing in the Church encouraged and facilitated his sexual abuse of those

Catholic children, including Plaintiff. Defendants' Priest knew that Catholic children were trained to give unquestioning obedience to priests (rather than to defend themselves from sexual abuse by priests), and exploited Plaintiff's trained obedience for his own sexual gratification.

38. Defendants' Priest's performance of priestly functions as an agent of the Diocese and/or Parish allowed unfettered access to these minors.

39. The facts described herein support legal claims for battery, premises liability, and negligence taking many forms, including but not limited to "failure to warn" or "negligent hiring, training, retention and supervision."

40. In addition to being liable for their own direct negligence, the Defendants are vicariously liable for the sexual abuse suffered by Plaintiff at the hands of Defendants' Priest under the aided-in-agency laws of New Mexico.

41. Defendants' acts and/or omissions resulted in injuries to Plaintiff and give rise to Plaintiff's causes of action for damages. As a direct and proximate result of sexual abuse from Defendants' Priest, Plaintiff suffered and continues to suffer serious injury and harm, including but not limited to psychological injury, emotional distress, embarrassment, humiliation, loss of self-esteem, depression, and other damages. His trust in religion and in authority figures has been seriously breached. His faith has been badly damaged.

42. Plaintiff is entitled to all compensation allowable under New Mexico law and jury instructions for harms caused by Defendants, including punitive damages.

43. Defendant RCDLC is legally responsible for punitive damages for the harms caused by its priests on its premises.

44. In addition or in the alternative, Defendant St. Eleanor Parish is legally responsible for punitive damages for the harms caused by its priests on its premises.

**COUNT I – NEGLIGENCE: RCDLC and ST. ELEANOR PARISH, INC.**

45. The allegations of the preceding and succeeding paragraphs are incorporated herein by this reference.

46. The Defendants had and continue to have numerous duties to prevent their conduct or the conduct of priests in their employ, care or custody from harming people, including Plaintiff.

47. Defendants' negligence includes, but is not limited to, the following acts and/or omissions:

- a. The Defendants knew or should have known that vulnerable children like Plaintiff were the foreseeable victims of sexual abuse when they were in the custody of persons with dangerous propensities like Defendants' Priest, and Defendants' accordant duty was breached by the assignment of Defendants' Priest to parish ministry without adequate vetting or supervision;
- b. The Defendants knew or should have known of Defendants' Priest's sexual abuses and/or other sexual misconduct, and knew or should have known of the sexual abuse of many other vulnerable individuals by many more area priests, and did nothing to stop or warn vulnerable parishioners like Plaintiff of the likelihood of sexual abuse by its priests;
- c. The Defendants knew or should have known of Defendants' Priest's proclivity to sexually abuse children such as Plaintiff, and did nothing to stop it or warn parishioners of its likelihood, or to warn parishioners that pedophiles were in their midst;
- d. The Defendants knew or should have known of the risk that some priests (specifically including Fr. Bernard Bissonnette) would sexually abuse Catholic

children if those priests were not closely supervised and/or that the Catholic children were not trained to defend themselves from sexual abuse, by priests and/or clergy but the Defendants took no steps to closely supervise their priests and/or clergy and/or to train Catholic children to defend themselves from sexual abuse by priests and/or clergy;

e. The Defendants failed to hire, train, supervise, and/or retain priests who would not molest, abuse, and harm vulnerable children;

f. The Defendants failed to supervise their priests in a manner sufficient to prevent those priests from sexually abusing children entrusted to them by virtue of their status as priests;

g. The Defendants failed to take reasonable precautions to protect Plaintiff from sexual abuse.

h. The Defendants failed to protect vulnerable parishioners like Plaintiff in their parishes from abuse by priests like Defendants' Priest.

48. Defendants breached their duties of reasonable care to Plaintiff and were negligent, resulting in damage to Plaintiff.

49. The Defendants' negligent acts and/or omissions directly led to the sexual abuse of Plaintiff by, among other things, empowering priests to abuse vulnerable parishioners, and adhering to policies and practices of secrecy to protect abusive priests and the Diocese and Parish from scandal. Adherence to these policies and practices of secrecy was more important to the Defendants than warning vulnerable parishioners of sexually abusive priests in their midst, which would have promoted safety and accountability.



50. Each of the above acts and/or omissions were singularly and/or cumulatively the actual and/or proximate cause of the occurrence in question and the resulting significant harm, injuries, and damages sustained by Plaintiff.

51. Thus, the Defendants are directly liable for their own negligence.

52. Defendants' acts and/or omissions described herein were intentional, malicious, willful, reckless, and/or wanton, displaying a conscious, deliberate, and/or reckless disregard of, or utter indifference to, harmful consequences, including the health and safety of Plaintiff, resulting in injuries and harm to Plaintiff, justifying an award of punitive damages.

**COUNT II – VICARIOUS LIABILITY FOR SEXUAL BATTERIES:  
RCDLC AND ST. ELEANOR PARISH, INC.**

53. The allegations of the preceding and succeeding paragraphs are incorporated herein by this reference.

54. The sexual abuse of Plaintiff by Defendants' Priest constituted sexual battery, among other torts.

55. At all times relevant to this Complaint, Defendants' Priest was an agent or employee of the RCDLC and/or St. Eleanor Parish. But for the fact that Defendants' Priest was a Catholic priest, with all of the duties, responsibilities, and vested and apparent authority that being a Catholic priest entails over a Catholic child – such as disciplinarian, teacher, confessor, and pastoral counselor – Defendants' Priest would not have had the necessary authorities or powers needed to abuse Plaintiff.

56. Thus, the Defendants are vicariously liable for the conduct of the priest who abused Plaintiff under the theory of “aiding-in-agency,” because they imbued the priest with substantial power over vulnerable children like Plaintiff and sexual abuse occurred as a result.

57. Priests are managers of parishes, and the Defendants are legally responsible for damages for the harms caused by its priests.

58. A corporation may be held liable for punitive damages for the misconduct of its employees, managers, and/or agents. The actions of Defendants' employees, managers, and/or agents, viewed in the aggregate, determine that Defendants had the requisite culpable mental state because of the cumulative conduct of its employees, managers, and/or agents. The totality of circumstances indicates Defendants' intentional, malicious, willful, deliberate, wanton and/or reckless disregard for the harmful consequences, including the health and safety of Plaintiff.

59. Defendants' employees, managers, and/or agents, engaged in in a pattern and practice of intentional, malicious, willful, deliberate, wanton and/or reckless conduct, which cumulatively demonstrated punitive-damages-invoking conduct on the part of Defendants.

60. Alternatively, Defendants ratified such conduct to justify the imposition of punitive damages.

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff requests judgment against the Defendants in an amount reasonable to compensate him for damages (including punitive damages), for interest including pre-judgment interest, costs, and such other and further relief as this Court may deem appropriate.

Respectfully Submitted,

HUFFMAN WALLACE & MONAGLE LLC

/s/ Levi A. Monagle 07/14/25

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