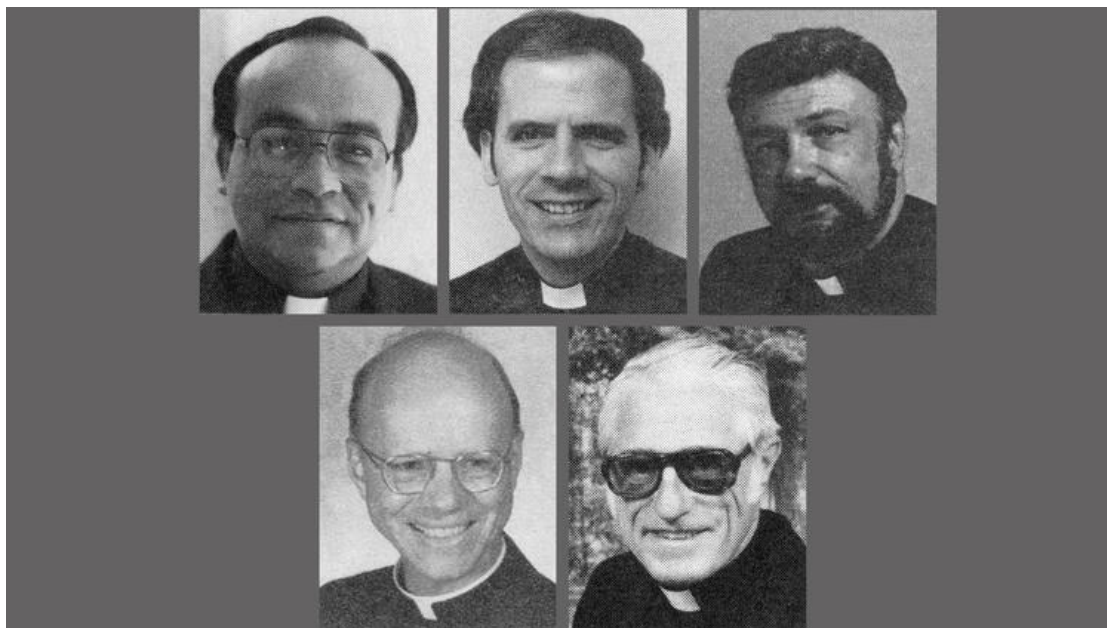


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San Diego's Catholic diocese adds eight priests to list of sexual predators



Five of the eight newly identified predator priests: top from left Rev. Jose Chavarin, Rev. J. Patrick Foley and Rev. Michael French. Bottom, Rev. Richard Houck and Msgr. Mark Medaer.

By **Peter Rowe and Kristina Davis**

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The clerical sexual abuse scandal rocking the Roman Catholic Church hit home Thursday, as the Diocese of San Diego added eight priests to the list of those believed to have molested children.

“This is a response to the terrible moment we are in,” said Bishop Robert McElroy, citing a recent Pennsylvania grand jury report that found 1,000 children had been molested by Pittsburgh area priests there, and the resignation of Theodore McCarrick, who is accused of sexually assaulting altar boys, seminarians and priests.





“The cascade of emotions that this causes the survivors of the abuse as well as other people in the pews, has caused a tumult of anger, grief, upset, incomprehension, disillusionment,” McElroy said.

The new names — the Revs. Jose Chavarin, Raymond Etienne, J. Patrick Foley, Michael French, Richard Houck, George Lally and Paolino Montagna, plus Monsignor Mark Medaer — were released in piecemeal fashion, with critical details missing.

This list extends the roster of predator priests established by a landmark legal case that was concluded 11 years ago. On Sept. 7, 2007, the diocese settled 144 claims of child sexual abuse by 48 priests and one lay employee. The payments totaled \$198.1 million, the second-largest settlement by a Catholic diocese in the United States.

Thursday’s announcement was prompted by the Pennsylvania grand jury report, the McCarrick case and other recent revelations that have called into question the church’s moral authority and its willingness to honestly address this scandal.

“There is a broad call for transparency,” McElroy said. “When we looked at it, we wanted to meet that as best we could.”

The newly listed priests were accused of abuse since the 2007 settlement, or reported to the diocese earlier in files that had been tucked away or mislaid. They were overlooked until, the bishop said, a recent review of records.

“They never kept good records on this stuff until recently,” McElroy said. “They kept records, but not in a very systematic way.”

Advocates for victims said that revealing the identities of accused predators is a valuable step.

“It makes them more accountable,” said Dr. Marianne Benkert, a La Jolla-based psychiatrist who, with her husband, the late Richard Sipe, studied clerical sexual abuse. “And there are still some victims of these priests here in San Diego. It will give those victims some comfort to see their abusers exposed.”

“Some dioceses are trying to do pro-active disclosures, which is great — disclosures are super important.” said Tim Lennon, president of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. “But it’s not because of the goodness of

their hearts. They want to protect themselves as much as they can.”

This crisis is worldwide, a fact underscored this week. On Thursday, Pope Francis and several top American bishops conferred on McCarrick's case. The day before, the Vatican announced that the pontiff will convene the world's bishops for a February 2019 meeting on the protection of minors.

In San Diego, McElroy will embark on a “listening tour” of the diocese, stopping at eight parishes between Oct. 1 and Nov. 5.

“I've met with a number of victims,” McElroy said. “They are looking for — they are really looking for the perpetrator to say it to them, but often the perpetrator is dead — so they are looking for the church to say we are truly sorry for this.”

This week, the diocese and other sources issued some details on the eight clerics added to that roster:

The Rev. Jose Chavarin. A native of Mexico, he served at Mary Star of the Sea in La Jolla from 1986 through 1991, while also working as associate pastor at Our Lady of Guadalupe in Calexico (1989-1990) and associate pastor at Lemon Grove's St. John of the Cross (1990-1991).

On June 20 and 23, 2008, the diocese received reports that Chavarin — then working in San Francisco — had sexually abused three boys while in San Diego. The incidents involved two brothers in 1986 or '87, and an unrelated boy who was abused between 1985 and 1988.

Confronted with these accusations, Chavarin denied any wrongdoing, then fled to Mexico.

Chavarin's current whereabouts are unknown.

The Rev. Raymond Etienne. A priest of the Society of the Divine Word, Etienne was an associate pastor at San Bernardino's St. Anthony parish from 1980 through 1988. He also worked at the Society of the Divine Word seminary in Riverside in the 1960s, where he allegedly sexually assaulted seminarians.

Etienne is deceased, the diocese reports, although officials there could not confirm when or where he died.

The Rev. J. Patrick Foley. While attached to the San Diego diocese, Foley has been living in Northern California since 1991. In 2010, he was suspended from ministry pending a church trial on charges that he had abused two Sacramento-area boys, whose parents had been friends of the priest.

The canonical trial ended in January 2011 without a clear verdict. “He wasn't guilty,” said Rodrigo Valdivia, the San Diego diocese's vice-moderator of the curia, “but that's not to say he was innocent.” His priestly faculties were restored until McElroy removed them in August 2015.

That hasn't stopped Foley from advertising on his web site as an “Itinerant Papist Preacher,” offering retreats and spiritual counsel. His most recent posting, dated May 18, 2017, is a personal reflection under the heading “Love — and then do as you will.”

This July, he led a “cluster mission” at St. Joseph the Worker in Dubuque, Iowa.

Foley did not return a reporter’s phone call Thursday.

The Rev. Michael French. In 2003, the diocese was alerted that French had abused a boy in 1980. French, who died in 1995, came to San Diego in 1973 to pursue doctoral studies at the California School of Professional Psychology.

In 1975, he was a chaplain at the Benedictine Convent for Perpetual Adoration in San Diego.

A director of Catholic Community Services and diocesan director for Worldwide Marriage Encourage, French met his victim at a social occasion in his parent’s home. There were several instances of abuse. The diocese paid a settlement to the victim, who did not press charges in court.

The Rev. Richard Houck. In his long career, Houck served as an assistant priest, an associate pastor, pastor and priest in residence at a series of local parishes — St. Vincent de Paul, St. Charles Borromeo, Our Lady of Angels, St. Charles, St. Didacus and Immaculate Conception, all in San Diego; Most Precious Blood in Chula Vista; and Our Lady of Light in Descanso.

In 1968, he assisted at St. Vincent de Paul, serving alongside the Rev. Hugh John Sutton. (In 2014, the Diocese of Fort Worth received reports of Sutton sexually abusing minors while working there as a teacher and chaplain between 1984 and 1992. Sutton died in 2004.)

While at Most Precious Blood in 1977, Houck molested a 10-year-old altar boy, according to the diocese. When the victim reported this abuse in 2004, the diocese paid a settlement and the victim did not pursue the matter in court.

Houck died in February 2002.

The Rev. George Lally. As associate pastor at St. Mary in El Centro between September 1970 and February 1972, Lally allegedly molested a boy. A 2002 diocesan report refers to a 1971 agreement to pay college costs for the victim.

“As compensation for having been victimized,” said Valdivia.

The Union-Tribune reported that a man identified as “Ralph S.” sued the diocese, alleging that Lally had abused him when he was an altar boy at St. Mary. “Ralph S.” told reporters that he had reported the crime to St. Mary’s pastor, and Lally was then transferred.

Lally, who left the priesthood in 1979, is married and living in San Clemente.

His wife, a former nun and longtime Catholic administrator and educator, was hired in 1983 as principal of Holy Family School. Within a month, she was terminated. She sued the diocese.

That case was dismissed in 1990.

Msgr. Mark Medaer. While pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Calexico, Medaer allegedly molested a boy in 1982. Roughly 20 years later, the victim reported this abuse to the diocese, which agreed to pay for his counseling.

Diocesan records show the counseling began in March 2002 and continued at least through November 2002.

Medaer died in June 1993.

The Rev. Paolino Montagna. Attached to the diocese for less than three years, Montagna was the associate pastor at El Centro's Our Lady of Guadalupe (August 1972-October 1973) and then held the same position at a parish in Calexico with the same name, Our Lady of Guadalupe (October 1973-January 1975).

He was accused of molesting two girls. The diocese was unable to say when or where.

Montagna, who left the diocese in January 1975, is believed to be dead.

The new revelations were dismissed by SNAP's Southern California liaison, Esther Miller, as "so much smoke and mirrors." Benkert, the La Jolla psychiatrist and a former nun, said the scandal "seems to be kind of unending.

"People can understand to what lengths the church has gone to try to protect itself as an institution," she said.

McElroy, though, argued that new measures taken by the diocese — including a civilian review board for sexual abuse complaints, and a prevention program in Catholic school curriculum — have been effective, to a point.

"I've been here as bishop three and a half years and in that time we have not had a live case of a priest abusing minors," he said.

"But at the same time, we've had four cases involving lay persons."

Yet others are sure that more reports of clerical abuse will be forthcoming.

"They're telling me that there are now 56 priests who are credibly accused of sexual abuse in San Diego?" asked Patrick Wall, a former priest who now investigates clerical sexual misconduct for a Minnesota law firm, Jeff Anderson and Associates. "I believe that number to be extremely short."

Reporter Pauline Repard and research manager Merrie Monteagudo contributed to this report.

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