

Ex-Priest Apologizes for Seducing Teen-Ager

■ **Religion:** He expresses remorse for the 'evil of the past.' The woman, now 29, appears with him at a news conference.

By PATT MORRISON
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Illuminated by the lights of a dozen news cameras, a former Roman Catholic priest apologized publicly Thursday to the woman he and six other priests seduced 10 years ago, when she was his teenage parishioner.

At another news conference Thursday, Archbishop Roger Mahony, said the responsibility for apologies rests on "priests who misused their vow of priestly celibacy," not on the archdiocese, which supervised the seven and advised one of them to stay out of the United States for several years after the scandal broke.

The apology that was issued Thursday came from Santiago (Henry) Tamayo, who read haltingly from his statement as the woman, Rita Milla, sat on his right and struggled to keep back tears.

"I had to go public and tell the whole truth. I knew that a cheap absolution would not undo the evil of the past," said Tamayo.

"I had her full trust and confidence, yet I got sexually involved with Rita," he said. "Wakened by the sense of my own sin, I failed as a pastor to rescue her from getting involved with the other priests. I am truly sorry for the pain, the anxieties and the sufferings she has

endured all these years."

Milla said she wished Tamayo, whom she had met in a South Bay parish, "had come out with the truth in the beginning when things were so hard. . . . I believe that he might have done that, were it not for the church."

The emotional exchange between Tamayo, 56, and Milla, now 29, was the first time the two had met since Milla filed suit in 1984, nearly two years after she gave birth to a child fathered by one of the priests.

She said that her child's father, whose whereabouts are still unknown, is "a coward. He should come out and admit it."

The 1984 suit, naming Tamayo, the other priests and the archdiocese, alleged fraud, clergy malpractice and conspiracy. It was dismissed after the priests disappeared and the archdiocese was excused as a defendant.

The archdiocese knew Tamayo had gone to the Philippines, but did not tell Milla's attorneys. It continued to pay Tamayo a monthly income for much of the four years he was abroad, while urging him to stay out of the United States and settle in the Philippines, according to letters Tamayo provided to The Times and Milla's attorney, Gloria Alford.

"I felt terrible inside," Tamayo said, "but did not have the strength to challenge my religious superiors. I was frightened and above all I wanted to remain a Roman Catholic priest. So I stayed in hiding abroad for years," until, under stress and after suffering several strokes, "I could no longer stand



THOMAS KELSEY / Los Angeles Times

Ex-priest Santiago (Henry) Tamayo reads statement apologizing to former parishioner Rita Milla, left.

it." Alford said she is still evaluating the documents Tamayo provided to determine if legal options are still open to Milla.

"To me it smacks of a cover-up," said Alford. "What else would you call it?"

Mahony answered questions at a press conference announcing the first issue of a Spanish-language church newspaper, Vida Nueva, mailed to 110,000 households.

He said he did not know what had gone on before he came to the archdiocese in 1985, "but we do not advise priests to flee their responsibility. We advise them to get their legal counsel and to work closely with their attorneys."

The church, he said, is always

"very grieved when anyone in consecrated life breaks their vows," but "meaningful" apologies must come from "the people who did the actions."

Asked about the archdiocese's advice that Tamayo stay in the Philippines, he said, "I don't think it was a matter of cover-up, precisely."

Milla had told The Times she had done Tamayo's bidding—going to his family in the Philippines to give birth—to protect the priests and the church. The Caesarean delivery at Tamayo's brother's clinic was complicated by high blood pressure and seizures.

"I almost died protecting their reputation. . . . I wanted to do things quietly. If their reputation

was hurt, it was their fault for not taking care of things.

Alford said Thursday, "We think it is the height of hypocrisy for the church to preach on one hand family values; but on the other hand to take an active role in assisting priests who abuse their position of trust."

Tamayo also thanked his former parishioners in several South Bay churches, some of whom contributed to a defense fund before he left the country in 1984, he said.

"I feel much better," he said after his apology. "I wish all my brother priests will come forward and feel as I do."

Times staff writer John Dart contributed to this story.