

Ex-Charlottesville priest faces sexual abuse counts

BY CARLOS SANTOS

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

CHARLOTTESVILLE — A former Catholic priest has been charged with two counts of fondling a child more than 27 years ago in Charlottesville, authorities said yesterday.

Paul Rodriguez, an assistant priest at Holy Comforter Catholic Church from 1965 until April 1966, was served warrants yesterday in Los Osos, Calif., said Charlottesville Police Detective Kristen Konrad.

She said Rodriguez is accused of "fondling the genital parts of a child" on two occasions in February and April 1966. The incidents occurred in the church rectory and the child was an altar boy age 11 or 12, she said.

Police began talking with other people who were altar boys at the time as part of their investigation, said Ms. Konrad. Others corroborated what the man said occurred to him, she said.

She said she has found several other men who say they were fondled at that time, but they were over 14 then. The law in effect at the time required a child to be under 14 for a felony to have occurred. Now, the law defines minors as those younger than 18.

Albemarle County police are investigating similar allegations involving Rodriguez's role as a priest at Holy Comforter School. The school no longer exists.

"I don't know if I have the tip of the iceberg or if I have the whole cancer," Ms. Konrad said. There is no statute of limitations on a felony in Virginia.

The former altar boy, who still lives in the area, called police about the matter six months ago.

"His primary concern was that this type of thing wouldn't happen to another child," said Ms. Konrad. "He's been dealing with it for some time now."

The man could not be reached for comment. But a relative said, "It's been a terrible thing for him to carry . . . His faith has been shaky and he blames it on this . . . He's a good person. There is a spiritual pain."

Rodriguez was ordained in Richmond on May 1, 1964,

and was an assistant pastor at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Norfolk from 1964-65, according to a spokesman for the Catholic Diocese of Richmond. Norfolk police said they are not investigating Rodriguez.

Rodriguez then came to Holy Comforter Church in downtown Charlottesville, which he left in April 1967. Ms. Konrad said church officials told her he was "dismissed" at that time because of allegations of child abuse.

Another former altar boy, who asked not to be identified, recalled the priest as being "outgoing, energetic, lots of fun. He was always smiling. Always friendly. All the kids loved him."

That former altar boy, who said he was not abused by Rodriguez and was quizzed by police in this case, said he remembered Rodriguez "left suddenly. He was just gone."

The diocese was aware of the investigation, according to a diocesan spokeswoman. The Most Rev. Walter F. Sullivan, diocesan bishop, and the Most Rev. David E. Foley, auxiliary bishop, were in Rome for their periodic diocesan report to Pope John Paul II and could not be reached for comment. They are the only administrators with access to priests' files.

Rodriguez, 59, has a doctorate in psychology and works as a clinical psychologist at the California Men's Colony, a prison, near Los Osos, Ms. Konrad said.

Reached by telephone at his office, Rodriguez said, "I'd rather not talk about this," before hanging up.

Ms. Konrad said Rodriguez refused to speak to California police who approached him as part of the investigation, and has obtained a lawyer.

Rodriguez faces a maximum of five years each on the two felony counts. Though no court dates have been set, Rodriguez will face an extradition hearing.

Ms. Konrad said an investigation is continuing regarding other possible victims. "More charges are possible," she said. "Anyone having had contact with the priest, I'd very much like to talk with them." She can be reached at (804) 971-3374.