

Church addresses abuse

Catholic leaders stress concern for victims

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CHARLOTTESVILLE — Charges that a former Roman Catholic priest fondled an altar boy in Charlottesville more than 27 years ago have focused an uncomfortable spotlight on an emotional issue that has roiled the church in recent years.

This month Paul Rodriguez, an assistant priest at Holy Comforter Catholic Church from 1965 until April 1967, was charged with two counts of sexually fondling a child in Charlottesville. He faces a similar charge in Albemarle County stemming from an alleged incident involving the same child at the former Holy Comforter School.

The Diocese of Richmond dismissed Rodriguez in 1966 after complaints of sexual misconduct. Rodriguez was sent to a treatment program in Jemez Springs, N.M., after he left Charlottesville, according to Bishop Walter Sullivan.

Rodriguez is a clinical psychologist at the California Men's Colony, a minimum- and medium-security state prison in San Luis Obispo, Calif. He was brought back to Charlottesville Tuesday.

"I think that what's bad about this is [that] it happened at all," said the Rev. Gerald P. Fogarty, a Jesuit and professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia. "What's good is, the church is addressing the problem."

At their annual spring meeting in New Orleans, the nation's Roman Catholic bishops started a committee to help victims of sexual abuse and to get abusers into therapy. The group will also try to work out difficulties in church laws that force them to support errant priests.

This summer, Pope John Paul II made his first public statement on the problem, lamenting "sensationalism" by the news media and forming a committee to study the complex-



Rodriguez

"How come? Why is it happening now?"

PAUL RODRIGUEZ
AS QUOTED BY HIS LAWYER

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▼ ABUSE FROM PAGE C1

The church has been accused of stonewalling past sexual abuse investigations, prompting lawsuits against a Rhode Island and New Jersey diocese and against the entire National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

But the current policy is one of cooperation, at least in Virginia. "Our concern is for the victim. If the police called investigating the case, we would do everything we can for the authorities," said the Most Rev. David E. Foley, auxiliary bishop of the Richmond diocese.

"They certainly haven't refused to give me any information I've asked for," said Kristen Konrad, a Charlottesville police detective who is investigating the Rodriguez case.

It is difficult to determine if the problem of priests sexually abusing children is widespread. There have been few reported cases in Virginia.

The Rev. Bertin Miller, a St. Louis-based Franciscan who has worked closely with sexually-troubled priests, said he believes the aberration in the priesthood matches that in the general population.

"About 2 percent [1 to 3 percent] of the population sexually abuses minors," he said, adding that most priests victimize post-pubescent mi-

nors and are not true pedophiles. "Many of these priests are psychologically and psychosocially teenagers. They never grew up," said Father Miller, who runs a rehabilitation program for priests called the Wounded Brothers Project.

"There's a concerted effort on the part of the hierarchy to be honest about this problem and to be aggressive about a solution. We've learned painfully in the past 10 years that you can't move these guys. You have to remove them."

Father Miller said that, of the tens of thousands of priests in the country, 500 to 1,800 are estimated to be sex abusers of minors.

Other claims of sexual abuse by priests range from a low of 400 nationally during the past decade to estimates by the Rev. Andrew Greeley, a Chicago priest-sociologist, that up to 4,000 priests may be guilty of sexually abusing children or minors.

"Our own calling says we are above weakness, we are above failure. But, in fact, we are flesh and blood," Father Miller said.

For the vast majority of priests, the issue has been painful. "People comment on how well I relate to children," Father Fogarty said. "But now I am extremely cautious even in putting my arm around a child. . . . Suspicion has been cast upon all priests."

Father Fogarty said he believes the church "should have a careful screening of candidates" for the priesthood. He also believes priests who sexually abuse children should be brought to trial.

"I know serious damage has been done," he said. "People do expect their priest to privately live out what he publicly preaches."

But he added that "priests do have the right to forgiveness."

The man who began the investigation of Rodriguez told police six months ago that the alleged fondling occurred in the rectory of Holy Comforter Church in downtown Charlottesville when he was an 11-year-old altar boy.

Albemarle County police are investigating similar allegations involving Rodriguez, but it is the policy of the Holy Comforter School, which has since closed.

Police said there is no statute of limitations on felony charges involving sexual abuse.

Rodriguez, 59, faces five years on each of the felony charges. "He's devastated," said his lawyer, Chris Casciolo. "He keeps asking me, 'How come? How come? Why is it happening now?'"

Casciolo said his client, a bachelor, has no criminal record. "He's a law-abiding man and he absolutely is denying the charges."

The man who said he was sexually abused by Rodriguez couldn't be reached for comment, but his mother said the hurt is not forgotten.

"To you it's 27 years. To us it seems like just last week. You carry it with you every day."

She said her son "is devastated, too. This has not been easy for him."

Rodriguez doesn't know what we have gone through. We can't believe in priests anymore.

She said no one from the church has approached them with help or to offer counseling.

Bishop Foley said the Richmond diocese recently learned the name of the alleged victim from a reporter.

The name is listed on the warrants against Rodriguez, but it is the policy of The Times-Dispatch not to identify the victims of alleged sexual abuse.

"We certainly want to reach out to them," Bishop Foley said.

Experts say the sexual abuse of children breaks their trust and often prevents them from forming stable adult relationships. Going public with their allegations years later may be part of the healing process.

"The majority of priests have lived up to their vows," Bishop Foley said. "We're really, really shocked by this whole happening. It's a very sad time for us."

