

West Texas Catholic bishop asks abuse victims to call

The Associated Press

LUBBOCK — A West Texas Catholic bishop, stunned by a television report that a dying O'Donnell priest molested parish children, on Monday invited phone calls from those who feel they've been victimized.

Bishop Michael J. Sheehan said two abuse experts will help the Lubbock diocese counsel people who say the Rev. Rodney Howell abused them.

"I am shocked to hear the allegation that this sexual abuse may have taken place in our diocese," Sheehan said.

"I know we have done all we knew how to do in order to prevent it. I can only pray that those who say they have been

the victims of such injury will come forth and, by the grace of God, benefit from the healing ministries we offer."

WWL-TV in New Orleans last week aired statements from people claiming Howell and his brother — Jerry Howell, a former Catholic priest — molested them and dozens others at a school for the deaf in the 1970s.

A therapist, attorney, parents and alleged victims all said in the report the Howells forced the children to masturbate and sometimes raped them. Rodney Howell brought Hispanic children from Texas to the school in New Orleans on visits, according to the report.

Both men are natives of New Orleans. Jerry Howell denied the allegations.

Rodney Howell, who has served in West Texas parishes for 28 years, is comatose with cancer at St. Mary's Hospital in Lubbock.

Sheehan said he found the complaints against Rodney Howell, 60, hard to believe.

"He's a very sincere man who has always worked with the poor, particularly the Hispanic poor," Sheehan said. "He was greatly loved by many people. But that doesn't mean there isn't somebody who doesn't like him."

"People had complained some years ago about finances, about his management, but nothing was said about sexual abuse."