Suit names Diocese in Fresno

Molestation of boys by priest alleged

A personal injury lawsuit has been filed against the Catholic Diocese of Fresno by two boys who allege that they were molested by a Kern County priest last year.

Monsignor J. Wayne Hayes, vicar general of the diocese, said Catholic officials have no comment because they have not yet been served with the suit.

It was filed March 25 in Kern County Superior Court by Ronald L.M. Goldman, a Marina Del Rey attorney representing the two boys, identified in the suit only as "John Doe and Richard Roe."

In a telephone interview, Goldman said diocesan officials "didn't exercise reasonable care and supervision of this priest. They knew or should have known and should have taken steps to prevent this conduct."

Goldman said the suit charges that the Rev. Bernardine Solvyns, administrator of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Boron from 1969 until he disappeared last year, had molested other youths before the alleged incident in March 1985.

Boron is a small community in the Mojave Desert in Kern County, which is part of the Diocese of Fresno.

Solvyns also is named in the suit. Other parties charged are the Roman Catholic bishop of Fresno, the Benedictine Order, to which Solvyns belongs, the Christian Brothers (another Catholic order) and St. Andrew's Priory, a Benedictine monastery in Southern California where Solvyns once lived.

A priest at St. Andrew's Priory said he doesn't think Solvyns had any connection with the Christian Brothers.

The suit asks for $10 million in damages. Goldman said the figure is "a cap," chosen to "encompass" the amount of damages a jury may decide to award.

The suit alleges that the two boys, ages 12 and 13 at the time, had been doing yardwork at St. Joseph's Church for about three months when Solvyns invited them to spend the night at the church rectory on March 30, 1985.

On that night, the suit alleges, the boys were molested by Solvyns.

In April 1985, the priest was arrested by the California Highway Patrol more than 50 miles away, near Ridgecrest. He was found drunk and talking about suicide, according to the Kern County District Attorney's Office.

Solvyns later was charged with two counts of molestation. He failed to appear for a court hearing on June 14, 1985, and a warrant was issued for his arrest.

The priest at St. Andrew's Priory said Solvyns is reported to be in Belgium and had been under a psychiatrist's care. The priest did not know whether Solvyns was still being treated.

According to the 1985 Catholic Directory, Solvyns was ordained at St. Andrew's Abbey in Bruges, Belgium, in 1938.

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