

Sins of the Fathers

A Honolulu bishop is accused of sex abuse in a federal lawsuit as Catholic scandals keep spreading

By RICHARD N. OSTLING

Without doubt it is the worst wave of moral scandals ever to beset Roman Catholicism in North America. Dozens upon dozens of priests have been accused of sexually abusing underage boys. Cases have erupted in most U.S. states and two Canadian provinces since the 1985 conviction of Louisiana's Father Gilbert Gauthier, who had molested 35 youths. So widespread are the cases that by one informed estimate, Catholic institutions have paid \$300 million in settlements—with no end in sight. "We could be sued out of existence," says Notre Dame philosophy professor Ralph McInerney.

Worse than the loss of money are the feeling of betrayal and the erosion of esteem for priests among many parishioners. The potential for such spiritual devastation escalated considerably last week, as a federal civil lawsuit was filed against Honolulu bishop Joseph A. Ferrario, 65, the first member of the U.S. hierarchy to face a sex-abuse suit. A spokesman for the bishop said in response, "These are old allegations, made by the same people. The bishop has denied them every time."

The bishop's accuser is David Figueroa, 32, a cook living in Florida who has tested HIV-positive. He first made charges against Ferrario anonymously in 1989 and went public on Geraldo Rivera's TV show last year. Now he has decided to try to make his charges stick, in detail and under oath. "No amount of money will make up for what he's taken from me," says Figueroa. "He used me. He ruined my life."

Figueroa's sordid account runs as follows. Beginning in kindergarten at St. Anthony's church in Kailua, Hawaii, he was continually molested by the parish priest. When the boy was in his teens, the priest died, but Ferrario, his successor, continued the sex abuse for years, paying Figueroa for odd jobs in return. Ferrario also aided Figueroa in quitting high school just before graduation and joining the gay community in San Francisco. Figueroa alleges that the sexual entanglement continued even after

Ferrario became a bishop, with trysts at church residences in Honolulu and Menlo Park, Calif. Figueroa's lawyers claim other witnesses will corroborate his version of the bishop's conduct.

Last week three Canadian scandals also made news. A judge in Newfoundland sentenced Edward English of the Christian Brothers to 12 years in prison, declaring, "You are a disgrace to the order and to humanity." A separate scandal involves six present and former diocesan priests in

ity and the duplicity among church officials who had harbored and recycled him so many times."

David Clohessy, a St. Louis political consultant who has a lawsuit pending against a priest, asserts, "The sexual abuse was terrible, but I think the response of the hierarchy is almost as bad." He says that when Bishop Michael McAuliffe of Jefferson City, Mo., learned of the case last year, the bishop turned the matter over to his lawyers without confronting the priest. Since then, the priest has been put on administrative leave, pending review.

Higher authorities played a role in the Hawaii case. As early as 1985, Figueroa's mother informed the then Vatican pronuncio, Pio Laghi, of the allegations against Bishop Ferrario. Figueroa contends that Laghi sent an investigator, who did a cursory check while staying in the bishop's residence. Apparently on this basis, the U.S. hierarchy declared the 1989 accusations to "lack substance." Ferrario's spokesman said last week that the Vatican Congregation for Bishops had judged them to be "baseless."

Catholic administrators insist they have responded as well as can be expected to the legal and pastoral tangle confronting them. A common complaint is that the U.S. bishops' conference has not set up a detailed nationwide policy and action plan. But Mark Chopko, the chief lawyer on the bishops' staff, says treatment of priests' problems is the business of each

diocese. As a result, some bishops have handled the cases well, while others have not.

Legal strategies aside, what should the church do? University of New Mexico psychiatry professor Jay R. Feierman, who has treated 500 abusive priests over 15 years, concludes that the priesthood inevitably attracts a certain number of potential molesters because of the celibacy rule. He thinks one preventive measure would be to require priests to live in religious communities where there are personal warmth and mutual support. Psychologist Eugene Kennedy of Chicago's Loyola University says that the large number of priests suffering from sexual conflicts "constitutes a pastoral problem of the first magnitude" but that bishops by and large have refused to investigate the issue seriously. As the lawsuits and ruined lives keep piling up, such lethargy will no longer do.

—Reported by Barbara Dolan/
Chicago with other bureaus



The accused bishop, Joseph Ferrario, after celebrating Mass at his cathedral in Honolulu; above, accuser David Figueroa at his home in Florida

Newfoundland. Also last week, a trial was ordered in the first of the abuse cases involving 19 Christian Brothers at a school in Alfred, Ont.

One attorney in the Hawaii suit, Jeffrey R. Anderson of St. Paul, has become a specialist in civil damage suits involving alleged priestly sex abuse and is pursuing more than 100 cases at present. Last December he won the biggest award to date, \$3.5 million (reduced to \$1.04 million on appeal) in the case of Father Thomas Adamson. Allegations against Adamson spanned 22 years, but two Catholic dioceses kept shutting him into new assignments.

Such developments have thrown a harsh spotlight on the performance of Catholic leadership. Says Jason Berry, the freelance journalist who broke the Louisiana story and is completing a book on the outbreak of clerical scandals: "The real shock was not that a priest could be capable of molesting children but the mendac-