

Abuse settlement in New Orleans a surprise to some

Bruce Nolan Religion News Service | Oct. 29, 2009

NEW ORLEANS -- When the Archdiocese of New Orleans announced last week, Oct. 20, it will pay \$5 million to an undisclosed number of adults who claimed that as children they were beaten, berated and sexually molested at Catholic orphanages, it took some by surprise.

The archdiocese announced a package settlement of 20 lawsuits, most of them filed by adults alleging that in the 1950s and 1960s they were abused at Madonna Manor and nearby Hope Haven, Catholic group homes on this city's West Bank.

"I hope these mediations and negotiations will bring some peace and reconciliation to those victims and all those involved," Archbishop Gregory Aymond said in announcing the settlements.

But because settlement talks are not complete, the announcement caught plaintiffs' attorneys by surprise.

Roger Stetter, who began filing lawsuits against Madonna Manor in 2005, was deeply critical of the church's performance so far.

"We've had to fight the church tooth and nail for more than four years to get it to acknowledge wrongdoing," he said. He charged the church has tried to suppress evidence of abuse at the institutions and said more suits would be coming.

For decades after their founding in the mid-1930s, the Catholic group homes were designed to shelter children and young adults from dysfunctional family conditions. Some children were sent by the courts as wards of the state; in other cases, desperate families unable to care for their children voluntarily sent them to the residential compound.

Beginning in the spring of 2005, adults who lived at Madonna Manor and Hope Haven in the 1950s and 1960s began to surface with accounts of mistreatment and sexual abuse at the hands of staff members.

Collectively, the lawsuits described a harsh psychological and physical environment in which disobedient children as young as 4 were sometimes told they were worthless and unloved.

They alleged the environment often included harsh beatings at the hands of nuns, including one who allegedly favored a collapsible military shovel. Some plaintiffs said they were sexually humiliated or abused by priests, nuns or staff members at the two Marrero institutions.

Ted Lausche, among the first to file suit, said he ran away from Madonna Manor after eight years of suffering various abuses. He said he has been unable to hold down jobs and has battled alcoholism, drug addiction and gone through multiple divorces.

"How do you learn intimacy after an experience like that?" he asked from his home in Lake Geneva, Wis.

For much of the period covered by the lawsuits, the homes were administered by Associated Catholic Charities, the archdiocese's former charity arm, and staffed by lay employees, as well as the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and Salesian priests and brothers.

Both institutions are still open, serving at-risk youths, but no one lives at either.

Aymond did not describe the few sex abuse cases in the settlement that seem not to be related to the two institutions.

He said a review of records and testimony convinced him and others that the allegations are generally credible.

"From what I've read and heard, both institutions did a tremendous amount of good," he said in an interview. "But there were some people who were obviously ill, and they took advantage of their ministry and hurt people.

"It's important that these wrongdoers come to light and that we admit that as far as we can tell, [the claims] are true."

Aymond, who took office as archbishop in August, said the settlements covered actions by eight people -- three priests and several nuns and laypeople.

Aymond did not identify any priests or nuns involved in the settlement. He said all were dead or, if living, out of ministry.

Under a promise made to Catholics during a 2002 meeting in Dallas, bishops pledged to reverse decades of secrecy surrounding sexual abuse by identifying Catholic priests when they were accused of sexually abusing minors, and relieving them of their ministry.

Archdiocese spokeswoman Sarah Comiskey said the church still honors that policy, so it was not clear why the three priests Aymond cited remained unidentified.

In 2003, the archdiocese disclosed that since 1950 it had paid \$1.007 million in settlements, therapy and legal fees involving sex abuse cases reaching back to 1950.

Last week's announcement brings the total of sex abuse settlements since 1950 to \$13.6 million, Comiskey said.

Aymond said the settlement money would come largely from archdiocesan cash reserves accumulated "mostly through investment income and non-parish-based real estate sales." He said insurance would provide some coverage, but the bulk would come from the church's treasury.

"I want to assure the community that none of the funds are a result of the implementation of the pastoral plan or the closure of parishes" after Hurricane Katrina, he said.

Aymond said the settlement would not affect the operations of any parish or ministry in the local church.

[Bruce Nolan writes for The Times-Picayune in New Orleans.]

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