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Claims in court far outnumber church listing

Archdiocese | Abuse accusations in bankruptcy documents involve religious order clergy, seminarians, nuns and others in addition to priests

By **ASHBEL S. GREEN** and **STEVE WOODWARD**
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Far more people in Oregon say they were abused by priests, clergy and other Catholic workers in the past 70 years than has been publicly known, a review of the Portland Archdiocese bankruptcy files shows.

The archdiocese's decision to seek bankruptcy protection in 2004 gave it some control over a flood of priest abuse litigation. But the move also revealed allegations that have remained secret for

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Sex abuse: Investigations more aggressive since 1980s

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decades. In some cases, documents and letters that the archdiocese possessed have been entered into the file. In other cases, people are making sex-abuse allegations for the first time.

Bankruptcy records show that people filed 368 legal claims of abuse and that 46 other reports of abuse were made informally. To date, more than 50 claims have been dismissed or withdrawn. Accusations have been made against 133 priests, religious order clergy, nuns, seminarians and other lay Catholic workers or volunteers.

In 2004, Archbishop John G. Vlazny said the archdiocese had counted 37 accused priests and 181 accusers between 1950 and 2003.

Archdiocese spokesman Bud Bunce said there are several reasons for the discrepancy. Many of the accusations came as a result of the bankruptcy and well after Vlazny announced his calculations, Bunce said. Several others were the responsibility of Catholic organizations other than the archdiocese, such as a teacher at Jesuit High School, he said.

"Many of these persons are wrongly alleged to be archdiocesan agents," Bunce said in a written response to questions.

Regardless of religious order, the magnitude of the alleged abuse surprised a longtime critic of the archdiocese.

"I never would have thought it was that high for Oregon," said Bill Crane, director of the Oregon Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "Now here we are in bankruptcy, still peeling away the layers of this onion. And that's a pretty big onion."

Bankruptcy documents also show how far the archdiocese has come in child-abuse reporting since the Rev. Thomas Laughlin's 1983 conviction for sexually abusing two altar boys. The documents show, however, that complete transparency is not the rule.

Laughlin-era documents indicate that church officials ignored internal whistle blowers and seemed to place a higher premium on containing scandal than confronting priests.

Since then, church officials have been more aggressively investigating complaints of sexual abuse. There is no known case of the archdiocese ignoring a sex abuse accusation since Laughlin's arrest. And a recent audit found that the archdiocese had complied with the policy on the books since 2002 that any priest accused of sexually abusing a child must be immediately removed from public ministry.

Transparency is another matter. Although the archdiocese publicly responds to charges and lawsuits, some accusations are still handled quietly, bankruptcy files show.

The Rev. Vincent Minh, the spiritual leader for many Southeast Asian Catholics in Oregon, departed in 2001 under what was described at the time as routine circumstances.

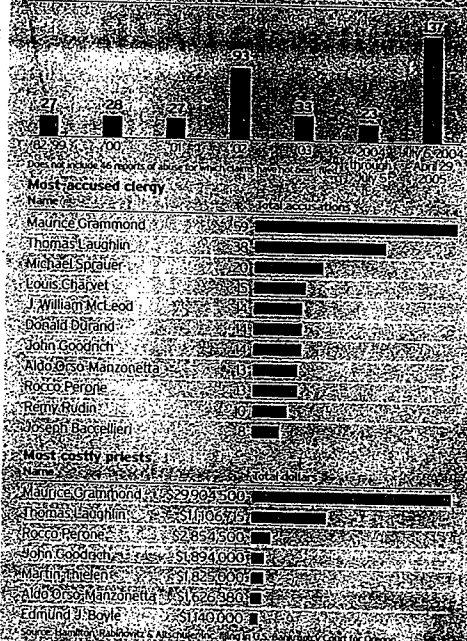
Undisclosed was the fact that prosecutors considered sex-abuse accusations against him credible, but chose not to pursue charges because too much time had passed since the assaults in the 1980s.

And as extensive as the bankruptcy records are, they only hint at the complete record on child sex abuse within the Catholic Church in Oregon.



Church officials did not disclose the sex-abuse accusations against the Rev. Vincent Minh when he left the Southeast Asian Vicariate in 2001. ROSS WILLIAM HAMILTON/THE OREGONIAN/1997

Sex abuse claims in the Portland Archdiocese



MICHAEL WOOD/THE OREGONIAN

Nationwide study

Two years ago, the John Jay College of Criminal Justice released an exhaustive study on priest abuse. It was commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and dioceses and religious orders were expected to open their files on priest abuse, accusations and settlements.

The study discussed only national numbers, but Portland and some dioceses decided to release their figures in addition to the national ones. Vlazny said the archdiocese and its insurers had spent \$3 million settling the cases. Bankruptcy documents describe those settlements in detail that was previously unknown. For instance, the archdiocese and its insurers paid nearly \$30 million to settle claims against the Rev. Maurice Grammond, Portland's most accused priest.

Crane said the additional information in the bankruptcy files supported his claims that the archdiocese has not been completely candid about past abuse.

"Once again, there's a continual pattern that takes place that they always minimize," Crane said. "Now we're finally getting more information."

Bunce said the archdiocese has been as candid as possible.

"We have tried to be open about the number of claims and number

of those accused," Bunce said. "We published numbers, very publicly in the past. Since entering the bankruptcy process this has been more difficult for a multitude of reasons."

How cases were handled

The bankruptcy documents reveal more details about how accused priests were handled and how the archdiocese has changed its approach to child abuse allegations.

In his and starts, records show the archdiocese progressed from a culture in which some priests abused children with few consequences to one in which any priest accused of abusing a minor is reported to authorities and removed from ministry.

The Laughlin case demonstrates how poorly priest accusations used to be handled.

In a 1986 deposition filed in the bankruptcy, Laughlin described meetings with Archbishop Robert J. Dwyer and his successor, Archbishop Cornelius M. Power. He said that both men, now dead, knew he had abused boys, but never forced him into treatment or restricted his access to children.

He recalled being summoned to Dwyer's office in 1970 after someone reported him for abusing a boy when he was a pastor in Corvallis. "He expressed terrible concern

for the boy involved," Laughlin said, "reprimanded me severely, actually cried because of what I had done to the boy, the church, myself, and said, 'You've got to stop this completely right here and now,' and asked me specifically, 'Do you think you need professional help?'"

"And I said, 'No.'"

About two years later, Dwyer confronted Laughlin a second time on similar accusations.

"It was similar to the first, but far more serious," Laughlin said in recalling the meeting. "And he said, 'I will have to move you now.'"

Dwyer transferred Laughlin to pastor of All Saints Parish in Portland.

In another example found in the bankruptcy file, a former president of the University of Portland, the Rev. Theodore J. Mehling, moved at least one abusive priest.

In a 1958 letter to the Rev. Archibald M. McDowell, who has faced two claims in Oregon, Mehling discussed his heartbreak over reports that the priest fondled two high school boys.

"When, for God's sake, are you going to learn to keep your hands to yourself?" wrote Mehling, who by then had moved to Indiana.

"We can move you, but where I don't know, at the Easter vacation," wrote Mehling, who noted that McDowell already had two canonical warnings about his conduct and could face expulsion for a third. "Change of place seems futile. Perhaps we can find an institution where you can get psychiatric treatment."

Psychological evaluation is now routine for accused pedophiles and ephebophiles, the term for adults who are sexually attracted to adolescents.

Laughlin forced a change in the rules. After the priest's 1983 arrest, the archdiocese adopted new rules about when and how to investigate sex abuse claims.

The rules were tougher, but not as strong as the landmark policy adopted by Catholic bishops nationwide in 2002.

During his 1986-95 tenure, former Archbishop William J. Levada removed at least four priests and sent at least two into treatment, bankruptcy records show.

But in a move that would not be allowed today, at least two accused priests later returned to churches, records show.

And under those rules, parishioners were largely left in the dark when priests were removed because of an accusation, the Rev. Charles Lienert said in a deposition.

Levada publicly discussed the removal of the Rev. John Goodrich from St. John Fisher Church in Southwest Portland after he was accused of molesting a boy starting in 1974. But under a later archbishop, members of Assumption Catholic Church, Lienert said, weren't informed in 1996 that their new pastor, the Rev. Joseph Baccellieri, was an accused child molester for whom the archdiocese had paid out \$575,000 in settlements to three claimants.

"I don't know why the bishop made that decision," Lienert said.

The archdiocese heard allegations against Baccellieri in 1992. Levada removed him and sent him through two years of therapy. After consulting with therapists, Levada returned him to ministry in 1994 under close supervision. The archdiocese received no reports of sexual misconduct for the rest of his career.

Available records reflect that the former archbishop exercised great care before returning an accused priest to a ministry assignment, said Jeffrey Lena, an attorney who represented Levada at a bankruptcy deposition last year.

"The decision was not arbitrary," Lena said. "It was taken seriously, and it was taken in consultation with professionals and under strict guidelines. It's not for no reason that when Levada handled such matters there was no reported re-offense in the Portland Archdiocese when it was under his stewardship."

Sent away for treatment

Minh had led the 5,000-member Southeast Asian Vicariate for 20 years when law enforcement learned about sexual abuse accusations against him in March 2001.

A Portland child abuse detective interviewed the accusers, Charles Sparks, a deputy Multnomah county prosecutor, later described their stories as "credible and consistent" in an internal August 2001 report filed in the bankruptcy.

Sparks wrote that "efforts were made during this investigation to interview the suspect and he refused." But the abuse allegedly occurred in the 1980s, and Sparks declined to prosecute Minh because too much time had passed since the assaults.

The report says that Minh's order, the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, also known as the Redemptorists, moved him to a "treatment facility" in Toronto. Court records identify it as the Southdown Institute, a nonprofit that specializes in the treatment of clergy.

Kristine Stremel, public and community affairs director for the Redemptorists, said officials immediately removed Minh when the allegations came to light.

Stremel, who did not work for the Redemptorists at the time, said she did not know why officials did not publicize the accusations.

"I can only speculate that it was not discussed to protect the privacy of anyone involved in the case — that means Father Minh and anyone who would have been accusing him," she said.

Stremel added that the current leader of the Redemptorists, who did not handle Minh's removal in 2001, informs congregations when priests are removed because of sex abuse allegations.

Minh could not be reached to comment on the allegations. He is now assigned to a Redemptorist center in Illinois, Stremel said. His public priestly functions have been revoked.

Bunce defended Vlazny's decision not to publicly discuss the allegations against the priest.

"When Minh left there was an ongoing investigation by civil authorities," Bunce said. "After conclusion of the investigation and conversation with persons in the Vietnamese Vicariate, it was determined that initiating a public discussion of the Minh matter would go counter to the cultural sensitivities of a Vietnamese community. Archbishop Vlazny respected that sensitivity."

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