



Child Molestation Scandal Scars Diocese, Frightens Church Leaders

By DAVID McCORMICK
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LAFAYETTE, La. — For years afterward, Faye Gastal's 12-year-old boy still stared from the window of his darkened home, watching for the black Camaro that used to come for him.

He was afraid the man would come back, the man who did those strange things to him. The man with the black car and the black gun. The black suit. And the white collar.

It has been more than a year since the Rev. Gilbert Gauthe pleaded guilty to charges of sexually abusing Mrs. Gastal's son and 10 other altar boys at his rural parish church. The case shocked the area's devout Cajuns and rattled the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Gauthe is serving a 20-year prison sentence, but the scandal hasn't ended with him.

A second priest from the Diocese of Lafayette has been sentenced on sex charges and suits are pending against a third; one church official says about 20 priests have been accused of or counseled for sexual misconduct.

Lawyers say the church has paid \$10 million in out-of-court settlements to at least 18 children sodomized by Gauthe, and at least 22 more alleged victims have lawsuits pending against him and two other priests.

Some of the cases go back more than 30 years, and lawyers and social workers say the number of victims in the diocese probably reaches into the hundreds.

With few exceptions, the accused priests were assigned to churches outside Lafayette, a city grown rich and cosmopolitan as a center of the once-booming oil industry. They operated mainly in rural areas where most people were poor and unquestioning in their obedience to the church.

"It has affected an entire generation," said Ray Mouton, a lawyer hired by the church to defend Gauthé and the diocese. "It will take another generation for the wounds to heal." Largely as a result of this scandal, sexual misconduct among priests is a growing concern within the Catholic church nationally.

"I do think this is the single most dangerous problem facing the church today," said the Rev. Thomas Doyle of Washington, D.C., a canon lawyer who investigated the Lafayette case for the Vatican. "We cannot demand as a church high sexual morality while appearing to condone such activity among our own." Sexual misconduct by priests also poses a major financial threat to the church. Mouton, who has been asked to speak at bishops' meetings held around the country expressly to discuss the problem, noted that the Gauthé case alone cost a single diocese \$10 million.

"If there are 100 more like him over the next 10 years, it's a billion-dollar problem," Mouton said.

Nationwide, Doyle estimates 40 to 50 priests have been charged with sexual misconduct in the past year. The church has about 57,000 priests in the United States.

The National Catholic Reporter, an independent weekly newspaper, recently called for church officials to confront the problem openly. Editor Tom Fox wrote that he had observed a pattern of bishops covering up for accused priests not only in Lafayette but in nearly a dozen other dioceses as well.

The Louisiana scandal began to reveal itself in 1984, when the parents of Gauthé's victims began suing the church. They alleged that church officials were aware of Gauthé's actions for nearly a decade before he was suspended in 1983, and were negligent in not removing him years earlier.

Bishop Gerard Frey and other church officials testified that Gauthé, 41, had been confronted with allegations of child molestation in 1974 and 1976, but was allowed to return to duty after counseling.

They admitted no liability for his crimes, however, until J. Minos Simon, the Gastals' lawyer, subpoenaed church files regarding the sexual conduct of 27 other priests. By admitting liability for wrongdoing on the part of Gauthé, the church did not have to surrender the other records.

Simon broke the scandal open by persuading Mrs. Gastal and her husband, Glenn, a crawfish farmer from nearby Abbeville, to fight their suit in public rather than accept an out-of-court settlement like the other victims' families before them.

Their case came to trial in February 1986 before a predominantly Catholic jury. Several jurors wept as the boy described how Gauthé molested him on his first day as a 7-year-old altar boy.

Struggling with a child's limited sexual vocabulary, he told how Gauthé initiated him sexually, eventually leading him into group sex with other altar boys. He said Gauthé took photographs of the sessions and shared them with the boys.

"I thought he was doing the right thing," the boy said. "He was a priest." The abuse began in 1982 and continued for more than a year, occurring in Gauthé's car, in a confessional and at his rectory, where he kept a pistol on display and bars over the windows. The boy said he was afraid to tell his parents because Gauthé threatened to kill them if he did. His parents testified that they liked and trusted Gauthé, recalling how the priest brought a gift when the boy was hospitalized for an unexplained case of rectal bleeding.

The boy seemed to like him, too, they said. But as the months of abuse wore on, he withdrew and would turn away when they tried to hug and kiss him. They told how he sometimes paced the house late at night, checking locks and staring at the driveway, afraid Gauthé would come back.

Psychiatrists testified that the boy and his parents would probably need therapy on and off throughout their lives.

The trial was the first time any victim or parent had revealed publicly what Gauthé had done and how it had affected them.

The church's lawyer, Bob Wright, challenged none of the testimony about Gauthé's acts. He objected mainly to the Gastals' decision to take their case to trial. He suggested that their refusal to settle out of court betrayed a lack of concern for the boy's welfare and that much of the child's trauma was caused by publicity.

On Feb. 7, 1986, the jury deliberated two hours, then awarded the family \$1.25 million.

Three months later, the diocese was sent a new bishop, Harry Flynn, to work with Frey, 72, and take over when he retires. The mandatory retirement age is 75. The announcement of a new bishop so far in advance was widely viewed as an attempt to confront the problems in the diocese and restore parishioners' trust.

Mrs. Gastal says her son, meanwhile, has been slow to recover.

"He has his good days and bad days," she said. "It's all we can expect now."

The church has settled almost all the claims from Gauthé's juvenile victims. It is still fighting lawsuits from victims who are now adults, contending that they waited too late to press their claims.

Paul Hebert, a lawyer who represents five adult victims, says the church is trying to stonewall on the extent of the abuse.

"I don't feel they have yet truly recognized or accepted their own responsibility for what happened," he said.

Simon, the Gastals' lawyer, goes further, saying pedophilia was part of a larger pattern of sexual problems within the church. He asserted the diocese became known over the years as a "safe haven" where "someone in authority knowingly condoned homosexual behavior."

"I don't think there's any other explanation for what happened," he said.

Next to Gauthé, Lafayette's most notorious priest is Ronald Lane Fontenot, a former youth leader removed from the diocese in 1983 after a boy's family threatened to bring molestation charges.

Fontenot, 40, ended up at church-run treatment center for teen-age drug abusers in Spokane, Wash., where he was arrested last year on charges of molesting five boys who were being treated there.

He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to a year in prison. Since then, civil suits have been filed by seven alleged victims in Spokane and at least five more in Lafayette.

Another priest in the Lafayette diocese, John Engbers, is being sued by seven women who claim he molested them. One is still a juvenile. Five are sisters who say Engbers molested each of them from the time they were children in the 1950s until adulthood.

The sisters said they told church officials about Engbers' acts repeatedly but nothing was done. Engbers, 63, left the diocese for his native Holland in 1985 after they began legal action.

Diocesan spokesman Gerald Dill recently said about 20 of the diocese's 205 priests had been counseled for or accused of sexual misconduct. That number is not necessarily surprising, he said.

"There's a case being made that there are more people in this profession afflicted with this problem," Dill said. "I don't think it's more out of proportion than other professions."

No one knows how many children may have fallen prey. Gauthier told prosecutors he remembered about three dozen victims, but psychiatrists who examined him said he probably tried to molest every young boy he encountered. One suit claimed he and Fontenot shared one victim.

Frey and Flynn did not respond to AP requests for interviews. Frey did talk with the National Catholic Reporter, however, saying he now realizes Gauthier should have been removed from contact with parishioners years earlier.

Today, Frey said, complaints about priests are investigated immediately by a panel of laity and clergy. If the evidence warrants, a formal hearing is conducted before a lawyer or judge who makes a recommendation to the bishop.

The diocese has also sponsored workshops on child sex abuse for parents, teachers and its own priests.

"You have to be more constantly alert and aware of the possibility of this," Frey said, "and to act immediately when there is even a suspicion of it."