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Case against notorious OC priest could be 1st in new wave of sexual abuse trials

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A childhood sexual abuse case involving a priest who was one of Orange County's most notorious predators is expected to be among the first of a massive wave of lawsuits filed against Roman Catholic dioceses statewide that are on track to go to trial next year.

More than fifteen years after a string of dioceses — include Orange County and Los Angeles — agreed to pay hundreds of millions related to hundreds of claims of sexual abuse by the clergy, an even larger wave of litigation is on the horizon due to a state law that temporarily lifted the statute of limitations for such cases, opening a three-year window to allow now-adult survivors to file lawsuits related to decades-old abuse.



Roughly 2,000 Southern California childhood sexual assault cases allegedly involving the Catholic church were filed in Southern California during the three-year window, including roughly 250 against the Orange County Diocese, according to attorney Morgan Stewart, whose high-profile Orange County-based firm — Manly, Stewart & Finaldi — is among those representing the numerous plaintiffs.

The lawsuits tied to Orange and Los Angeles counties have been consolidated and assigned to a Los Angeles judge. One of the lawsuits brought by Stewart and his firm is the first to be allowed by the judge to move forward for trial in Los Angeles, the attorney said, setting the stage for an expected trial early next year.

The case involves Father Eleuterio Ramos, who before his death admitted to sexually assaulting more than two dozen boys during a decades-long career that included stops in multiple parishes across Orange County, as well as Father Siegfried Widera, who at the time of his death was one of the most wanted sex crime fugitives in North America.

The plaintiff in the lawsuit said he was molested by Ramos beginning at the age of 5 when he was a minor parishioner at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Santa Ana around 1979 or 1980, and later sexually abused by Widera around 1984 and 1985 when he was about 10-years-old.

“It is possibly the worst case (the diocese) probably could have gotten out the door,” Stewart said of Ramos. “He had no discretion. He didn’t stop himself. Nobody stopped him.”



Stewart says he now also has new evidence bolstering the long-held contention by victims’ attorneys that church leaders at the time actively knew about the sexual abuse of minors and covered it up.

In a sworn statement filed with the court, a now-retired alcohol counselor who worked at a treatment center for clergy members in Massachusetts in the 1970s and 1980s recalled the center admitting Father Ramos for treatment after Diocese of Orange leaders referred him for treatment related to alcoholism and “sexual impulses related to sexual abuse of minors.” Diocese leaders overruled the counselor’s recommendation that Ramos not be placed back into the ministry, the former counselor said in her statement.

“I learned it was common practice at that time for the Bishops who referred us priests who abused minors to move those priests into other parishes or churches upon their return,” the counselor said in her statement. “This is what occurred with Father Ramos, despite my concerns that I communicated about his potential to re-offend.”

Stewart alleged that the sole concern for church leaders at the time was “to hide these guys and send them out of the jurisdiction of law enforcement.”

“Where is the concern for the kids?” Stewart said. “That is going to inflame a jury beyond belief.”

Jarryd Gonzales, a spokesman for the Diocese of Orange, said the organization “remains steadfast in its commitment to eradicating the abuse of children and vulnerable adults and to providing a voice and support to those who have suffered.” He noted that clergy, employees and volunteers are now required to undergo fingerprinting, background checks and “recurring safe environment training.”

He added, “The Diocese of Orange deeply regrets any past incidences of sexual abuse. Those words are backed up by actions: the Diocese has undertaken extensive and diligent efforts for more than 20 years to safeguard children and vulnerable adults and prevent future abuse.”

In response to the allegations raised in the lawsuit, Gonzales said the church as a general rule doesn’t comment on pending litigation, but noted that discovery — the exchanging of information between the attorneys about the witnesses and evidence expected to be presented at trial — in the case is in the “very early stages.”

“The Diocese intends to let the facts uncovered in discovery guide its response to this lawsuit,” Gonzales said. “And as to an alleged cover-up: the plaintiff’s allegations — which date to 1979 — were never brought to the attention of the Diocese (or law enforcement) prior to the filing of the lawsuit in 2020.”

The previous wave of childhood sexual abuse lawsuits ended with settlements prior to jury trials, including a then-record \$100 million settlement by the Diocese of Orange covering 90 cases in 2004 followed by the Los Angeles Archdiocese settling 508 cases for \$660 million in 2007. In Orange County, the settlement came with apologies to the victims by church leaders.

The new wave of lawsuits has already led several dioceses in California to either file for bankruptcy or contemplate doing so, including the Diocese of Santa Rosa, the Diocese of Oakland and the San Francisco Archdiocese. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles and the Diocese of Orange have not indicated any plans to pursue bankruptcy.