San Diego diocese names 38 accused priests

by Sandi Dolbee and Mark Sauer

SAN DIEGO - In its most extensive accounting of priests accused of sexually molesting minors, the Catholic Diocese of San Diego released the names Friday of 38 priests with "credible allegations" against them, along with their church service records dating to 1928.

None of the priests is now in ministry here, according to the lists posted on the diocese's Web site. More than half are deceased.

San Diego Bishop Robert Brom pledged to release the names last month, when the diocese filed for Chapter 11 reorganization in bankruptcy court. The diocese became the fifth in the country to seek such protection, filing its petition late on Feb. 27, hours before the first of roughly 150 lawsuits was set to begin trial.

The lists do not include any details of the accusations. Micheal Webb, the diocese's attorney, said the intent in making the priests' names and their assignments public was to encourage other possible victims to report past abuses.

"The purpose is to get the word out," Webb said. "We want people to come forward - as many people as possible."

But San Diego attorney Irwin Zalkin, who represents 30 plaintiffs in civil lawsuits, said the diocese's accounting is incomplete. His own list has the names of 31 additional priests, men who the attorney said also are accused in local lawsuits of sexually abusing minors.

"This is a list of 'priests with credible claims'? Credible according to whom?" Zalkin said. "Are (diocese officials) to be the sole judge and jury here?"

"It's misleading when they say these are the credible claims; it insults the victims whose perpetrators are not listed," he added.

Notices about the named priests will be inserted into bulletins for this weekend's Palm Sunday services. The announcement directs parishioners to the Web site and urges people with more information to contact Monsignor Steven Callahan, the diocese's vicar general.

Notices also will be inserted into bulletins in the San Bernardino diocese, which was part of San Diego's jurisdiction until 1978.

Among the men named by the diocese is James Booth, who said Friday that he "wholeheartedly" denies any wrongdoing. Booth, who became an Episcopal priest after leaving the Catholic Church, is retired and living in San Diego. He said he resented having his name listed, "but I guess there's nothing I can do about it."

Franklyn Becker, who was defrocked by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee two years ago after 40 years as a priest, said he was upset to learn he was named by this diocese.

"I don't think I should be involved because it was a long, long time ago," said Becker, contacted at his home in Mayville, Wis.

A third man, Patrick McNamara, called the accusations "crazy."

"I really would not like to comment except I think it's all false," McNamara said. He left the priesthood in 1995 to get married, according to the diocese.

A spokeswoman for a national advocacy group for victims said she was skeptical about the diocese's motivations.

Joelle Casteix, Southwest regional director for the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, questioned why Brom didn't release the names years ago, as several other bishops have done.

But Webb rejected that criticism. "This is a pastoral statement by the bishop," he said. "The bishop determines the timing of a pastoral statement not SNAP."

Brom has rarely identified accused priests. Among the exceptions: In 1993, he told parishioners that police were seeking the Rev. Emmanuel Omemaga in connection with allegations of sexually abusing a 14-year-old girl; in 2002, he announced he had barred retired priest Rudolph Galindo from ministry after Galindo admitted to abusing three male minors; and in 2003, Brom said that the Rev. Robert Koerner, who was then deceased, had molested children between 1963 and 1990.

Earlier last week, the diocese filed court papers proposing a settlement fund of $95 million, which would be dispersed to victims based on several factors, including the seriousness of the abuse. That plan is expected to be among the issues taken up by the bankruptcy court in a series of hearings scheduled for April.

San Diego Union-Tribune staff librarians Merrie Monteagudo and Erin Hobbs contributed to this report.

Â© Copley News Service

San Diego diocese names 38 accused priests by Sandi Dolbee and Mark Sauer