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Ground Zero for Molestation in the Catholic Church

By Dan Moffett
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Jemez Springs, N.M. - Highway 4 bends with the river through the canyon between red-rock mesas with ponderosa pines.

Sixty miles northwest of Albuquerque, the two-lane road finds this village of 413, a remote enclave of eclectic spirituality.

Here, lumbermen and aging hippies have no choice but to share bar stools at Los Ojos, the town's saloon and social wellspring. A sign above the kitchen reads: "Save a logger. Eat an owl."

Conversations are heard in Spanish and the Native American dialects of Towa and Keresan. The Bodhi Mandala Zen Buddhist camp is across the road from the tavern.

A half-hour away at Los Alamos, scientists in great secrecy created the atom bomb.

In Jemez Springs, the Catholic church conducted clandestine research of its own. For four decades, the church brought some of its worst pedophile priests here to be treated in the monastery by the river.

They were given drugs to suppress their sex drives. They were told to act out their deepest fears in theatrical therapy sessions. They were counseled. And they prayed.

The church believed it could rehabilitate, then reassign its sex offenders. But much of the work here failed, and with catastrophic consequences.

New Mexico became ground zero for an explosion of sexual abuse cases.

[Photo and Map Captions: 1. Michael J. Sheehan, 2. Merit Bennett, 3. Robert Sanchez, 4. (B&W) MARK HOLM/, This 1993 picture shows the church at the Servants of the Paraclete, hidden in a scenic canyon in the small town of Jemez Springs, N.M., photo by Mark Holm, Albuquerque Journal, 5. Map, Servants of the Paraclete, by Sean Tevis/Staff Artist]

Hundreds of the state's children, many of them in the small parishes of the rural villages and pueblos, were molested by priests who had been treated at the monastery, then released. As victim after victim came forward in the 1990s, the Diocese of Santa Fe was driven to the brink of bankruptcy by more than 200 civil suits and paid out at least \$50 million in settlements.

The Servants of the Paraclete, an arcane religious sect founded in Jemez Springs 51 years ago, carried on the psychiatric treatment programs in white bungalows by the river until 1995.

"I have to blame the people in Jemez for what happened to me," said Raymond Arellano, a 39-year-old construction worker. "They tried to cure priests that could not be cured. Pedophiles are like coyotes. Once they taste blood, they have to have more."

An altar boy in the early '70s, Arellano was repeatedly molested in the northwestern village of Gallina by one of the priests the Servants of the Paraclete treated and the church relocated.

Bruce Pasternack, an Albuquerque attorney who represented dozens of molestation victims, has accused the Servants of infecting the state with sexual predators.

"Although New Mexico has only one-half of 1 percent of America's population, it had 20 percent of America's priest pedophiles," Pasternack said. "The center existed so that criminal priests did not have to pay criminal penalties."

At its peak 25 years ago, the Servants' headquarters on Highway 4 was home to as many as 50 visiting priests at a time. Some suffered from burnout, depression, mid-life crises or alcoholism. Townspeople

jokingly referred to the monastery as "The Center for Boozy Priests." Scores of them were known pedophiles to the church, but not to the town.

They lived in riverfront bungalows beneath the cottonwood trees, played tennis on the monastery courts, swam in the pool, prayed in the tall chapel and walked down the sloping highway to Los Ojos to eat burgers and drink Budweiser with the locals.

"The center was really just a way to hide very sick men and then recycle them after five or six months," said a licensed psychologist who treated priests in Jemez Springs until 1995. "You cannot cure pedophiliacs. I never pretended they could be cured. But I constantly fought to see they were controlled. No one would listen."

The Rev. Liam Hoare, the Irish-born executive director of the Servants, refused interview requests. But he has said in published reports that the Jemez Springs center no longer treats psychiatric patients and now concentrates on holding group retreats.

'We didn't know much'

Three weeks ago, Bishop J. Keith Symons of the Palm Beach Diocese resigned after admitting molesting five altar boys some 30 years ago. The church said it sent Symons to an undisclosed site for psychological treatment - not Jemez Springs.

Symons' replacement, Bishop Robert Lynch, believes the church has come to a better understanding of how to deal with its abusers. "We know much more about the problem than we did decades ago," Lynch said. "We didn't know much about this 30 years ago."

Much of what could be learned is found in what went wrong in New Mexico.

Exactly how many pedophiles were treated and released in Jemez Springs is a lingering matter of dispute. Alan Konrad, an Albuquerque attorney who represented the center, said in court papers that only a small fraction, less than 6 percent, of the center's "guests" had problems with sexual attractions to children. Attorneys for victims maintain the number was much higher.

Marlene Green, who now lives an hour away in Placitas, N.M., was the director of psychodrama at the clinic for 10 years, leaving when it changed course in '95. She directed patients in group therapy role playing, using theater to expose subconscious issues. She said she worked with about 30 pedophile priests during her tenure.

"I think the Servants did wonderfully well," said Green, who has a nursing degree. "Of course there were mistakes that were made. Nobody's perfect. But I was proud to be part of the dynamic treatment program we had in the '80s."

According to Green and other former employees of the Servants, therapists experimented with a drug called Depo-Provera that lowers testosterone and reduces sex drives.

Green said nearly all the patients were permitted to leave the grounds and mix with the public. "This wasn't a prison," she said. "It was a place for healing."

A psychologist who worked at the facility in the '90s said the lack of control over the patients was a great problem.

"I pleaded with them to move the pedophiles into a psychiatric hospital where they could be constantly monitored," the therapist said. "No one would listen. Pedophiles were allowed to leave the campus on weekends and drive into the city to look for victims."

Hoare, in announcing three years ago that therapy programs were ending, pointed to numerous lawsuits against the Servants. He said negative publicity had left the center "stigmatized as the pedophile center for the Roman Catholic clergy throughout the world." He admitted the Servants had not cured all their guests.

"With the tremendous number of men who were guests of the Paracletes over the years," Hoare said then, "one cannot say that all were success stories nor deny that, in good faith, mistakes were made."

Old scars surfaced in 1990s

The Servants' quiet existence, and that of Jemez Springs, came to a traumatic end as the 1990s began and the seeds of old horrors came to fruition.

Victims in mid-life came forward with the same stories. Three of the most notorious pedophile priests to be treated by the Servants, then dispatched to assignments elsewhere in New Mexico, were James R. Porter, David Holley and Jason Sigler.

Porter was convicted of repeatedly molesting more than 80 children in Massachusetts, Minnesota and New Mexico in the 1960s and early 1970s. He was treated by the Servants of the Paraclete from 1967-69 and again in 1972.

Porter's signature was a warning to his victims: "God will get your families if you tell anyone about this." In 1993, at the age of 63, he was sentenced to 18 to 20 years in prison by a New Bedford, Mass., judge after one of several criminal trials.

Holley molested dozens of altar boys in Massachusetts during the '60s and was sent by the church to Jemez Springs for treatment in 1971. He was reassigned to St. Jude Mission in Alamogordo, N.M., where he molested children in his parish and used them to make pornographic films. In 1993, an Alamogordo judge sentenced Holley, then 65, to 275 years in prison.

Sigler was sent to the Servants for treatment in the late '60s after sexual assault incidents in Winnipeg, Canada, and Michigan. He was reassigned to a parish in northwest New Mexico, where dozens of victims would accuse him in the '90s of molesting them as children. Sigler is no longer a priest and has pleaded guilty on numerous charges.

Arellano is one of at least 10 former altar boys who have reached undisclosed civil settlements with the church over Sigler's abuses. Arellano's younger brothers also were victims of Sigler in Gallina, a village of 400 three hours northwest of Albuquerque.

"It didn't matter to me whether I got \$ 10 or \$ 100 million from the church," Arellano said. "I didn't do it for the money. My whole point was to bring it out in the open and let people know what was happening. Somebody had to put their feet in there and see that it was stopped."

When the cases began surfacing a decade ago, the church first turned to hardball tactics. During depositions in his case, Sigler sat across the table from one of his victims as a church lawyer asked the 30-year-old man: "When (the priest) touched you, did you enjoy it?"

The church has profound and uncommon power in New Mexico, where this year Catholicism is to celebrate its 400th anniversary. More than a religion, it is a way of life that has its origins in the Spanish conquistadors and has consuming power over people of the villages and pueblos, where each adobe home has a statue of the Madonna in some corner.

"The rural nature of New Mexico played a part in making the problem worse here," said Merit Bennett, a Santa Fe attorney who has sued the church 70 times in molestation cases, half involving the Servants. "Priests have more power than any other authority in these rural places. There is a reluctance to question or report any weird behavior."

Native Americans and people of Mexican ancestry, who for centuries have looked to the church for leadership and stability in their lives, were inherently vulnerable to predatory betrayal.

"In the Catholic Church here, you're taught that the priest is your connection with God," Arellano said. "He is the church. And what he says is gold."

Diocese ravaged

Atop a dusty plateau along the bank of the Rio Grande River, Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan can look out the window of his office building and see the city of Albuquerque spread before him.

There and beyond is the Diocese of Santa Fe which he oversees, a religious domain of 300,000 people in 91 parishes scattered throughout the far reaches of the state. About 40 percent of the state's 1.6 million people are Catholic, compared with 26 percent nationwide. Many of these faithful are also impoverished.

Sheehan took over a diocese four years ago that was deteriorating on all fronts - legal, financial and spiritual. He replaced Robert Sanchez, the nation's first Hispanic archbishop, who was forced into resignation after admitting sexual affairs with a half-dozen young women.

During a deposition in a molestation suit against the church, Sanchez testified he didn't do more to stop the pedophile priests in his diocese because he didn't know sexually abusing children was a crime.

The money problems Sheehan inherited were just as astounding. He warned his fellow Catholic bishops that the Santa Fe diocese might be the first in U.S. history to go bankrupt.

Insurance companies claimed they weren't liable to cover many of the court settlements because the church had been negligent in failing to identify its sex offenders. All numbers are creatures of approximation, given the diocese's refusal to give precise amounts. But the toll of some 200 suits could ultimately exceed \$ 100 million, and more than \$ 1 million already has been paid to provide treatment for some victims. Critics claim too much has gone to lawyers to fight suits and too little to treat the abused.

To help pay the bill, Sheehan sold off some pricey church properties and closed down a retreat house run by Dominican sisters. He has appealed to each of his 77,684 Catholic households to give more.

This year, they are. Support for the annual Catholic Appeal Foundation pledge drive here is running at a record rate, up about 10 percent over last year.

To cover the deficits of the spirit, he reversed the confrontational approach of his predecessors and made it a practice to call or visit victims and express his remorse. The church says about 75 victims have received an official apology from Sheehan.

To congregations throughout the diocese, he has delivered the same sermon with the same message: "If human beings were really capable of destroying the church, we would have done so centuries ago."

Victims' attorney Bennett believes Sheehan has succeeded in bringing some reforms to the church in New Mexico.

"They have taken such a financial hit, they have had to change," Bennett said. "They are screening their people more closely. I know they have made a real effort to solve their problems. There are a lot of concerned people in the church who are legitimately trying to get rid of the pedophiles."

Hoare acknowledged the toll on his Servants has been heavy, the settlements exceeding \$ 10 million. He blames media reports for amplifying the misery.

"Civil litigation ultimately led to the mortgaging of almost everything we owned," he has written in public essays. "The adverse national publicity destroyed the attractiveness of our secluded facility. . . . The media in its reporting did not always avoid sensationalism and inaccuracy."

No longer treating clergy

Hoare is advertising his bungalows on the Internet, hoping to attract corporate groups to Jemez Springs for retreats.

He spent much of this month on England's west coast, in Stroud, Gloucestershire, where the Paracletes operate another facility called Our Lady of Victory Trust. For decades, it has treated European priests for pedophilia as Jemez Springs once did.

In April, the Vatican ordered a review of procedures there after reports that abusive priests who had undergone treatment were involved in sexual assaults after their release. Five years ago, a 38-year-old priest who was in therapy at Our Lady of Victory Trust committed suicide by throwing himself under a speeding train.

Hoare told the London Independent the center would no longer be dealing with sexual abuse cases.

"It's not fashionable or profitable to be treating wounded clergy," he said.

Church settlements

Archdiocese of Santa Fe:

The Archdiocese of Santa Fe is home to the Servants of the Paraclete retreat. Priests from around the country were routinely sent to the retreat for treatment of problems such as pedophilia or alcoholism. Priests often were reassigned to New Mexico parishes when they completed their treatment. In 1993, Archbishop Michael Sheehan asked parishioners in an open letter to contribute more money to weekly collection baskets in an effort to pay for some \$ 50 million in settlements stemming from 41 lawsuits alleging clergy sexual abuse. At least 20 priests were removed from the ministry in the Santa Fe Archdiocese, and more than 165 abuse cases were settled by the archdiocese.

Mexico priests of sexual abuse dating to the 1970s.

Sigler agreed to a \$ 13 million settlement. Sigler left the priesthood in 1982 after being charged with sexually abusing a child. As of 1993, more than 30 people had sued the archdiocese, saying at least 12 of its priests abused them when they were children.

who said ex-priest Jason Sigler abused from 1970-1974, when they were 6 to 12 years old. By 1994, almost 100 people who say they were sexually abused by priests had come forward, and more than 50 lawsuits had been filed. Accusers later filed lawsuits against the Archdiocese of Winnipeg, Canada, for sending Sigler to New Mexico.

Nearly 30 other lawsuits are pending.

claims of six men and women who say they were sexually abused by priests in the late 1950s to early 1970s. Terms of the settlements were confidential. Priests involved in the claims included Earl Bierman, a former priest who went to Santa Fe from the Archdiocese of Covington, Ky.; former priests Marvin Archuleta, Louis Martinez and Frank Sierra from the Holy Cross Parish in Santa Cruz; and Sigler of the Servants of the Paraclete.

- Also in 1996, former Santa Fe Archbishop Robert Sanchez admitted that he frequently violated his vow of celibacy and kept quiet about accusations that priests sexually abused children because he didn't know it was a crime. Sanchez resigned in 1993. By the end of 1996, the diocese had resolved 157 cases. About 12 cases were still pending. The amount of the settlements was not disclosed, but diocese officials said it was substantially less than the \$ 50 million they thought might be needed.

Staff researcher Barbara Gellis Shapiro contributed to this story.

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