

4-11-08 - Did bishop hide facts from the diocese?

Jane Gargas, Yakima Herald-Republic

A national support group for clergy sex abuse victims is keeping the pressure on Catholic Bishop Carlos Sevilla, calling on him to explain his actions concerning a priest convicted of a sex crime in Oregon who had previously served in the Yakima diocese.

In a letter sent to the bishop on Thursday, Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests accused Sevilla of hiding the criminal conviction of the Rev. Jose Joaquin Estrada Arango, 42, from Yakima parishioners.

"The bishop should have told the entire diocese that this priest was arrested, charged and pleaded guilty," said David Clohessy, SNAP's national director, in a telephone interview.

Estrada, who served as a priest at St. Peter Claver Church in Wapato in 2001 and 2002 and briefly at Holy Redeemer Church in Yakima in 2003, left the Yakima diocese to work in Boardman, Ore., in February 2003.

In December of that year, court papers show he pleaded guilty to felony sexual abuse in Morrow County, Ore., and was subsequently deported to his home country of Colombia.

Clohessy, whose organization is based in Chicago, said Bishop Sevilla should have notified parishioners at Holy Family and in Wapato of Estrada's conviction to see if there had been any sexual misconduct there.

"When there is publicity about sexual abuse, in our experience, more victims or witnesses almost always come forward," Clohessy said.

Monsignor John Ecker, a spokesman for Sevilla, said that the Yakima diocese didn't conduct an official investigation of Estrada here because there were no complaints made against him.

"I remember that he was arrested in Oregon," Ecker said. "Personally, I don't think there is anything gained by telling that to parishioners."

Yakima attorney Russ Mazzola, chair of the Diocesan Lay Advisory Board, said Thursday that he doesn't recall hearing anything about Estrada here, and the advisory board had not investigated his conduct in this diocese.

This is the second time in a week that SNAP has criticized Sevilla. Last week the group urged the bishop to suspend himself without pay for at least a month for the way he handled the case of Juan Jose González Rios, a diocesan employee who is currently jailed in Yakima for allegedly viewing child pornography.

Sevilla went to the media April 1 to acknowledge that he had hired González at St. Peter Retreat Center in Cowiche, knowing that he was under criminal investigation for child pornography.

González was arrested last month on an Oregon warrant after he was pulled over for speeding in Tieton. He is being held in Yakima County jail in lieu of \$80,000 bail pending an extradition hearing.

On Sunday, Sevilla personally apologized to parishioners in Cowiche for hiring González. He also sent a letter to all parishes in the diocese, asking that his apology be read aloud during Masses.

In the case of the priest convicted of sex abuse, the bishop of the Baker, Ore., diocese said Thursday that, to his knowledge, no prior complaints had been made about Estrada when he came to Oregon.

The Baker diocese encompasses all Catholic churches in Eastern Oregon.

After Estrada was charged with five felony counts (four were dropped when Estrada pleaded guilty to one count), Bishop Robert Vasa said he informed Sevilla about the conviction and deportation. However, Vasa said he did not publicize the case in his own diocese.

"The hard reality is that Father Estrada was very, very popular with parishioners," Vasa said. "I had more letters of support for him than complaints when I sent him away. He was very charismatic."

Copies of the Morrow County sheriff's report indicate that Estrada's victim was a 14-year-old girl who attended church where Estrada was serving as a priest. She told investigators Estrada had kissed her and fondled her breasts on several occasions and had put his hands in her pants. Each time, she said she tried to fend off his advances.

Bishop Vasa said that as soon as the crime was reported, the girl received counseling, facilitated by the church.

A spokesman for Voice of the Faithful, a group seeking reform in the Catholic Church, believes the Baker, diocese acted in good faith.

"For the most part, they did the right thing because they called police as soon as the abuse was alleged," said Robert Fontana. "I just wish they had informed the parishes of Estrada's conviction."

Fontana noted that Estrada's conviction came after the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops pledged in Dallas in 2002 to be "open and transparent" about allegations of cleric sexual abuse.

"It's ironic that all this is happening when Catholics have designated April as National Sexual Abuse Awareness Month," Fontana said.

In its letter, SNAP called on Sevilla as "penance" to forgo his plans to travel to Washington, D.C., next week for Pope Benedict XVI's first papal visit to the United States.

Ecker, the diocesan spokesman, chafed at SNAP's suggestion.

"They don't have the right to tell the bishop where or where not to go," he said.

Ecker indicated that Sevilla's plans to attend the Papal Mass next Thursday are tentative.