

Today, boys and girls, we take up the edifying story of Father Andrew Christian Andersen, a former priest of the Diocese of Orange and a multiple molester of underage youths. Two years ago the L.A. Times gave us a synopsis of Andersen's adventures in pastoral ministry:

It previously had been reported that Andersen was accused in 1983 of molesting a boy. [Then-Bishop of Orange William R. Johnson] ordered him into therapy, but he remained at his Huntington Beach parish, St. Bonaventure, and in charge of the altar boys. Three years later, the priest faced up to 56 years in state prison after being convicted of 26 felony counts of child molestation, according to court documents. 56 years in prison -- or a decent fraction thereof -- would have helped Andersen understand the gravity of his offense, as well as giving his victims a sense of justice done. Didn't happen:

The judge gave Andersen no prison time and instead ordered him to enter a Catholic rehabilitation center in New Mexico. Four years later, in 1990, Andersen was arrested in Albuquerque on suspicion of trying to sodomize a 14-year-old boy, and was ordered to serve six years in prison for violating his probation in the California case.

Twenty-six convictions and zero prison time? How did that come about? Well, it seems Andersen's erstwhile spiritual director wrote the judge urging therapy at the Servants of the Paracletes treatment center in New Mexico as an alternative to the slammer. His reason? Andersen's victims may have confused innocent horseplay for, well, less-than-innocent horseplay. An excerpt from the letter of 24 August 1986:

Throughout these past twelve years I have known Chris Andersen to be a kind, generous, outgoing man, intelligent and thoughtful in his studies and work, consistently solicitous for the welfare of others and to be of service to them. ...

I do not know how Chris got involved in his present trouble. My own strong sense of the situation, though, is as follows: I do not see Chris as a pre-meditating, manipulative planner of any misconduct with the young men involved. That simply does not square with the man I know quite well. It does seem possible to me, however, that in the moments at hand, he might well have misjudged what was appropriate physical expression, especially given the atmosphere of adult-child contacts in our society at present [OTR's emphasis]. To give a concrete example, what Chris might have considered something as harmless as "wrestling" or "horsing around" (and what might, indeed, have passed for such during his own childhood) might objectively have been out of line and subjectively (for the children involved) confusing and disturbing.

Consistently solicitous. Right. So who was this uniquely perspicacious friend and spiritual director that pleaded so earnestly -- and successfully -- on Andersen's behalf? None other than George Niederauer, currently the Archbishop of San Francisco.

But Father Andersen had others rally to his defense as well. The following from a letter sent to the same judge by another clergyman companion (23 August 1986):

Chris Andersen and I together attended St. John's Seminary College and St. John's Seminary. He and I developed during those years of study a friendship which was a great consolation to me especially during a very trying third year of graduate work. I grew to admire and respect Chris both for his insightfulness and well as the tender compassion he possessed for those who were suffering. As we entered the seminary together our friendship provided a mutual support during the fledgling days of priesthood and I saw him as a very capable and compassionate minister. He seemed to approach the ministry with a sense of confidence that was tethered by equal amount of humility.

Chris Andersen's present difficulties pain me very much not only because he is a friend but also because he is an associate in the ministry. Our works brings us into intimate contact with people's lives. In a time when the exchange of simple affections within the most intimate of circles has become a rare commodity, our associations with others run the grave risk of being misunderstood by all parties including perhaps the priest

himself [OTR's emphasis]. There is cause therefore to exercise prudence and right judgment while at the same time pursuing the mission of Church to bring healing and comfort. If Chris has failed in exercising such prudence or has in fact abused the privilege provided him by the people of God I would the hope the court would seek some remedial means of dealing with the case at hand as opposed to extensive incarceration. This letter, like the one previous, was written after Andersen's conviction. Like the one previous, this letter is remarkable for its failure to weigh the sufferings of the victims against Andersen's "tender compassion" in coming to a true assessment of the man. Nor do we hear any concern (which one might expect from a Catholic clergyman) for the fact that the sufferings may have included spiritual harms -- harms with incalculably far-reaching consequences for victim and perpetrator alike. Far from being abashed and apologetic for having misread Andersen's character so disastrously, his advocate actually presents his friendship with Andersen as a point in his favor.

Now who was this second paragon of brotherly love? Jaime Soto. And what do you do with a man so concerned with "the grave risk of being misunderstood" when exchanging affection? Well, you make him Bishop Designate of Sacramento, of course. Let the celebration begin.

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In the past two decades California has been extravagantly ill-served by her bishops: a judgment based not merely on debatable religious criteria, but one obvious to any attorney, accountant, or law-enforcement officer - - Catholic or heathen -- who bothers to study the situation. The most positive possible reading of the calamity (the negative ones are un-uploadable) is that the California bishops themselves are atrocious judges of character, wholly incapable of distinguishing Catholics from pagans and criminals from men of integrity. So why doesn't the Nuncio wipe the slate clean and start over? He has the easiest sell in the world. No need to descend into personalities or sordid speculation about motive; all he has to do is underline to Rome the need for solvent dioceses headed by un-indicted ordinaries. If the Holy See took the point, any recommendation made by any California bishop would count as an eo ipso disqualification for office.

Put another way: if Fabian Bruskewitz were the Archbishop of San Francisco, would Most Holy Redeemer be in the headlines today?