

April 2, 2007 -Dismissed sex abuse lawsuit -Priest's alleged victim: 'I'm better every day'

He and his brother say the past haunts them, but won't defeat them

By Pamela Manson, The Salt Lake Tribune

MAGNA - Former Catholic priest James F. Rapp has been part of Charles Colosimo's existence since he was a boy. Today, although Rapp is no longer near Colosimo, his presence lingers - painfully.

Colosimo cannot escape memories of the man he says sexually abused him. He sees Rapp's picture when he looks through Colosimo family photos taken at weddings and other major events. He has stacks of legal documents that remind him of his long - and ultimately unsuccessful - lawsuit to hold the Catholic Church liable for his torment.

But counseling and a book he's writing about a horrific part of his life have brought him peace.

"I'm in the process of recovering," said Colosimo, who is 45. "I feel like I'm better every day." A March 13 ruling by the Utah Supreme Court that upheld the dismissal of his lawsuit claiming church officials knew of Rapp's sexual predation but failed to properly supervise him was disappointing to Colosimo but not unexpected. He has no regrets about pressing his claims, even though the case took four years to reach the high court and cost him thousands of dollars in legal expenses.

"Regardless of the outcome, it was the right thing to do," he said.

His older brother, Ralph, who alleges Rapp also attacked him, agrees. He says the two are not casualties of the once-trusted priest who became a predator.

"We don't consider ourselves to be damaged goods," Ralph Colosimo, 53, said.

'He was just sick'

In Utah, the name Colosimo is associated with sausage and the Catholic Church.

Ernie and Gabriel Colosimo, sons of Italian immigrants, opened a market in Magna in 1947 and soon expanded into a sausage business. In addition to being successful businessmen, the brothers were devout Catholics.

The Colosimo children, including Charles and Ralph, who are Ernie's sons, all went through the Catholic school system. They attended Mass regularly and served as altar boys.

Rapp was hired in 1968 to teach at Judge Memorial Catholic High School and became a close friend of the Colosimo family, according to court documents. Rapp targeted him in 1971 when he was 10 years old, Charles said, and for the next four years, "this priest was having his way with me every way he could."

The abuse often took place in the basement of a Rose Park house where Rapp lived, Charles said. He said Rapp claimed to be an undercover agent for the FBI, showing him a badge and a cache of guns to back up the story.

Threats to hurt him or his family members stopped him from telling what happened, Charles said.

"He was a violent guy. . . . He was just sick."

Finally at age 14, Charles Colosimo couldn't take it anymore, he said. He bolted out of the house and ran down Redwood Road to a convenience store, where he called an older brother to pick him up.

Neither talked about the incident for years. They feared harm and ostracism for speaking out against a priest, Colosimo said.

He has no memory of seeing Rapp after that. The priest soon moved to Michigan and then Oklahoma.

For justice, not money

After graduating from high school, Charles Colosimo attended Utah State University on a foot-ball scholarship and ultimately earned a political science degree from the University of Utah. Then came a job with an auto parts company and marriage in 1991.

By 1996, years of emotional pain were taking their toll. With his wife, Lauri, ready to leave over Charles' outbursts of anger, the couple went into counseling.

The therapy helped him deal with the abuse, he says. He and his wife reported Rapp to the Catholic Diocese of Salt Lake City in November 2000.

The church's reaction angered them. Charles said the diocese offered to provide counseling but there was no apology or offer of compensation.

He declined the offer of pastoral care, saying it was as if the wolf were inviting the chicken into its lair. Later, he learned that Ralph also had been abused by Rapp.

Ralph contends in court documents that the abuse occurred in his junior and senior years at Judge Memorial, when he and other students were invited to the nearby Oblate House. The residence, named for the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, which trained and ordained priests for Catholic schools and parishes, had a fully stocked bar and a swimming pool.

On one occasion, Rapp allegedly tried to rape Ralph Colosimo but the teen fought him off. Ralph said he repressed his memories of abuse until he went into counseling after a 1998 divorce.

The brothers filed suit in February 2003 in 3rd District Court seeking \$80 million in damages, by their own admission a "ridiculous figure," to get the church's attention. Named as defendants were Rapp, the Salt Lake City diocese, the Oblates, Judge Memorial's board of financial trustees, and three priests who were administrators at the high school.

Both brothers insist justice, not money, was their motivation.

The diocese responded with a statement saying it learned in November 2000 that "a young man had possibly been abused" by Rapp and that officials had offered the man pastoral care. Two years later, the diocese said, it learned through an attorney that a second family member also had claimed abuse by Rapp.

Charles says the church was most concerned with protecting its image. Ralph said children still are at risk from predator priests because, although church officials encourage everyone to report abuse, "they just don't stop it."

A diocese statement issued after the Utah Supreme Court decision said the church has implemented programs to protect young people, reports all allegations of abuse and makes pastoral care available to victims.

"The Catholic Diocese has offered such care for both Charles and Ralph Colosimo," the statement said. "They and their families have been and continue to be in our prayers."

Priest now behind bars

Documents produced in the lawsuit include a 1959 evaluation of Rapp conducted for the Oblates during his training to be a priest.

Guidance Associates, a Delaware agency, described Rapp, then 28, as a "timid and self-effacing young man." Its report said Rapp became sexually aroused at the sight of someone wearing loafers, a feeling accompanied by so much hostility "he feels like picking up a chair and breaking it."

In 1986, Saint Luke Institute in Maryland also evaluated Rapp, after he was accused of improper sexual activity with a 15-year-old student. The diagnosis included ephrophilia, or sexual attraction by an adult toward an adolescent; fetishism; and mixed personality disorder with schizoid and obsessive-compulsive features.

Now defrocked, Rapp pleaded no contest in 1999 in Oklahoma to charges in the sexual abuse of an Oklahoma boy and is serving a 40-year sentence. The Colosimos won a default judgment against the former priest after he failed to respond to their suit but never collected any money from him.

Lawyers for the other defendants continued to fight. So did the brothers.

"We thought it was important to hold out for the three As - admission, acknowledgment and apology," Charles Colosimo said.

The suit against the other defendants was thrown out by the 3rd District Court and the Utah Court of Appeals on the grounds that the brothers had waited too long to file it. Under Utah law, they had until age 22, four years after they became adults, to pursue legal action.

In arguments last year before the Supreme Court, no one denied the brothers had been harmed. Instead, attorneys focused on the statute-of-limitations issue.

Larry Keller, the lawyer for the Colosimos, said the nature of child sex abuse prevented the brothers from coming forward. He also cited a 2002 article in The Washington Post that outlined a history of abuse allegations against Rapp as newly discovered evidence in the case.

But defense attorneys argued the men had failed to investigate their potential claims. The justices agreed and threw out the suit.

Matthew F. McNulty III, the lawyer for the diocese, said the church itself did not commit the alleged abuse and should not have to defend itself against allegations concerning 30-year-old incidents.

Family yes, church no

Throughout it all, family members stood behind the brothers. Charles and Lauri are still married; Ralph has remarried.

The two, who help run the family business, expect to finish their book later this year and are in talks with a publisher. The book will be dedicated to their wives.

Neither brother considers himself Catholic anymore, a profound change for them.

"My whole life was spent with the church, taking the sacraments," Charles said.

Ralph recalls getting up at 5 a.m. on many Sundays to serve as an altar boy at the early service.

"From the time we were 4 or 5, our lives were dedicated to serving the Catholic Church," he said. "But there's nothing left in the church for us."