

1-31-08 - Documents detail church coverup: Newly released records from a California lawsuit settlement show the extent of the Milwaukee Catholic Archdiocese's efforts to conceal priest's sex abuse

By MARIE ROHDE and MARY ZAHN, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Hundreds of pages of just-released documents that the Milwaukee Catholic Archdiocese compiled over four decades reveal a coverup of pedophilia that involved top church leaders and touched a prominent law-enforcement official.

The documents, which a California court released as part of a \$16.65 million settlement of civil lawsuits in that state, paint more than just another graphic story of a priest who sexually abused children: They could be a harbinger of things to come for the church here as victims of abuse press their cases in the courts and the Legislature.

The archdiocese fought to keep sealed the documents, which focus on Franklyn Becker, an archdiocesan priest who has been accused of sexually abusing nine teenage boys in Wisconsin and one in California, the first case dating to just two years after his ordination.

The records indicate that as early as 1983, church officials sought the advice of E. Michael McCann, then Milwaukee County district attorney, about a priest's record of sex abuse, without identifying Becker by name. The documents say McCann, a Catholic, advised the church to take the priest out of ministry "for about five years, and if no complaints come forth in that time perhaps he can be given another chance."

McCann said Thursday that at the time, he was not told of any criminal activity involving Becker.

He said the conversation about Becker, referred to in a 1983 document, involved a phone call from an archdiocesan official who spoke of concerns about a priest who was "spending way too much time with a particular boy." McCann recalled being told that the boy's mother supported her son's relationship with the priest. The boy had made no allegations of inappropriate conduct, and there were no allegations of criminal misconduct, McCann said.

"Do you think, for God's sake, if they told me he committed a crime that I would say keep him away (from the boy) for five years? . . . If they told me he had committed a crime, I would have acted on it," McCann said.

But a log entry made by Father Joseph Janicki, vicar for the archdiocese at the time, indicates McCann told him the priest "has been given adequate warnings and enough chances and that he should not be assigned anywhere where he could come in contact with youngsters."

Michael Finnegan, an attorney working for the victims, said McCann's recollection that he had been told of only one boy, and that no one chose to make a complaint, seemed inconsistent with the document.

"That sounds to me like they told him about a lot more than one kid whose mother said it was no big deal," Finnegan said.

McCann said information in the documents lacked context, asking, "Why don't you have the whole diocesan file?"

Finnegan said that if the former district attorney was correct and there was more detail in Becker's file on the conversation, then the church did not produce the entire file as the California court ordered, and that his firm would seek contempt charges against the archdiocese.

Incident at seminary

Becker, now 70 and a defrocked priest living in Mayville, was described in documents dating to at least 1970 as abusive. Church records show that the archdiocese had received at least nine credible reports of abuse involving children. In 1983, a psychological report described Becker as a pedophile who was in denial.

Signs of trouble go back to his days at St. Francis Seminary, where shortly before his ordination in 1964, Becker entered the bed of a sleeping classmate and was accused of attempting to initiate sex. The matter was forwarded to Archbishop William Cousins, who considered kicking Becker out of the seminary.

Becker met briefly with the archbishop, who asked a few questions and then concluded there was no reason Becker should not become a priest. "I recall his parting words, which were 'Don't muddy the waters,' " Becker said in a separate statement that the Journal Sentinel obtained.

Becker began abusing children, according to the complaints, at his first assignment at Holy Assumption Parish in West Allis.

After several parish assignments, Becker asked to be assigned to college campus ministry and was removed from one because of his involvement with Dignity, a gay Catholic group.

Becker received permission to take an assignment in San Diego in 1977, and he was involved with at least one teenage boy who later sued. The Milwaukee Archdiocese was made aware that Becker was asked to leave his San Diego assignment, but the record does not show details of sex abuse.

Back in Milwaukee in 1979, he had a number of short assignments at parishes before he went on a nine-month sick leave in 1983.

A psychological report suggested that he be assigned to an all-girls high school, a college for women, a nursing home or, last on the list, a college. It was noted that although a college would present temptations, at least those involved would be adults.

Becker then was moved into hospital ministry - something in which he had earlier said he had no interest.

Archbishop Rembert Weakland wrote to Becker in 1983, wishing him success in his assignment as a chaplain at St. Joseph Hospital but also warning him that if there were a recurrence of his "past personal problems," Weakland would take steps to remove him from the priesthood. Weakland's letter came just months after a therapist's warning that Becker was a pedophile who did not have the "mechanism" to stop abusing boys and that "parish ministry is out of the question."

After a second hospital chaplaincy, Becker was given no formal assignment from 1990 onward. He was placed on a "restricted" ministry in 1993, but he was still allowed to help out in parishes until 2002. Parishioners were never told of his misdeeds.

In 1995, a three-person team of psychological and criminal experts interviewed Becker regarding nine allegations.

"The accused (Becker) admitted not only some of the alleged incidents but also factually described and admitted to multiple others," according to an investigative report. "These admissions were supported by various letters and entries in his personnel file."

Reached at his Mayville home this week, Becker said he believed that his rights - both the constitutional rights afforded every citizen and church law protections for a priest - have been violated.

He said he has been "through the mill" and added: "There is a gospel of forgiveness and redemption, but that apparently doesn't apply to me. I pray every day that the Lord will take me."

Financial repercussions

Becker's misconduct and that of the late Siegfried Widera, another archdiocesan priest who served for a time in California, cost the archdiocese millions in out-of-court settlements in California, as well as legal fees and payments for psychological treatment for both the victims and the abusive priests.

The archdiocese has acknowledged that it knows of more than 40 priests who have been credibly accused of sexual misconduct, but it has refused to release clergy personnel files - such as those released in California.

Last year, the Wisconsin Supreme Court opened a door to lawsuits by victims of sex abuse by priests, saying the church could be sued for fraud for not telling the public about abusive priests before placing them in public ministry. At least seven people have already filed suit.

Further, a bill is pending in the Legislature that would allow lawsuits to be brought despite the age of the allegations - a step that would remove what has been a principal roadblock for victims.

The archdiocese said this week that it faced a \$3 million deficit in the current fiscal year and that further cases could push it toward bankruptcy.

Jeff Anderson, a lawyer from St. Paul, Minn., who represents victims here, called the release of that news a "shameful public relations tactic, timed to the release of these documents."