

12-3-07 - Former Catholic Priest Pleads Guilty To Molesting Boys
KNBC, Los Angeles, CA

LOS ANGELES -- A former Southland Catholic priest pleaded guilty Monday to molesting two teenage boys more than a decade ago and was sentenced to 10 years and four months in state prison.

Michael Stephen Baker, 59, formerly of Long Beach, pleaded guilty to a dozen felony counts of oral copulation of a person under 18.

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Curtis Rappe gave Baker credit for 717 days served behind bars, as well as 358 days credit for good behavior since his Jan. 19, 2006, arrest.

Along with the prison term, the judge ordered the former priest to undergo HIV/AIDS testing, register as a sex offender for the rest of his life upon his release from prison, and pay one of the victims \$20,000 for mental health counseling.

Baker spoke only when he entered his guilty plea and when he was asked by Deputy District Attorney Marc Beaart whether he understood and gave up each of his rights, including his right to a jury trial and his right to pursue an appeal.

Eight of the charges involved crimes occurring between Jan. 1, 1994, and Aug. 14, 1995, with one boy, the prosecutor said. Baker admitted the factual basis for the charges.

According to the plea agreement, Baker -- then 47 -- sexually molested the youth at least twice in Palm Springs, again on two separate stays in a Los Angeles motel room and then again at two separate homes in Long Beach. The boy also visited Baker at St. Camillus Rectory in Los Angeles, according to the court document.

The other four charges involved the second victim between March 1, 1996, and Dec. 31, 1997, according to Beaart.

Baker pleaded guilty to those charges because it was in his best interest to settle the case, attorneys said, but he did not admit a factual basis for those counts.

Those charges involved a 15-year-old altar boy at St. Columbkille Church in Los Angeles who alleged that Baker sexually molested him on a trip to San Diego and on at least five different occasions at Baker's Long Beach home.

Cardinal Roger Mahony issued a statement shortly after the priest's sentencing.

"For many years, Michael Baker deceived parishioners, therapists, church leaders and most of all, his victims," Mahony said. "By his actions, he caused terrible damage to innocent lives, and obscured the good deeds of many priests and others who minister to God's people."

He said he hoped "that today's actions, combined with his previous removal from the priesthood, bring into sharp focus for him the horrific damage he has caused, and that it also brings some sense of justice and solace to his victims and to the church community that he so grievously harmed."

Neither of the victims was in court for Monday's hearing, but another alleged victim and family members of others who say they were victimized by Baker said they believed he should spend the rest of his life in prison.

Matt Severson told the judge that Baker entered his life when he was 9 years old and that he was "deprived of much of my adolescence and the ability to mature and grow as a normal teenager" as a result of the priest's actions.

He said he still suffers from nightmares due to the alleged sexual abuse and has resigned himself to "feeling that I'll probably never fully comprehend the totality of the destructive impact Michael Baker has had upon my life."

The father of another alleged sexual abuse victim told Baker that he had ruined lives, broken up marriages and "destroyed so many kids."

"You made my son lose his faith," he said.

The judge said he believed the sentence reflected a fair compromise.

"I think it does save the victims a lot of future anguish," Rappe said.

One of Baker's attorneys, Leonard Levine, said outside court, "By his plea and sentencing, he has taken responsibility for his actions. He hopes that his plea and sentencing will provide some closure to anyone he may have harmed."

William Hodgman, head deputy of the District Attorney's Target Crimes Division, told reporters that he believed the sentence was a "fair resolution." He noted that it spared the victims the ordeal of having to testify and be cross-examined during a trial.

Baker was first criminally charged in September 2002 in a case involving a youth who had been an altar boy at St. Paul of the Cross Church in La Mirada in the 1990s. But that case, along with those against nearly a dozen other former Los Angeles-area priests, was dropped in 2003 when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the statute of limitations applied to California's child molestation laws.