

May 23, 2007 - Sex-abuse accusers can sue priest trainers

NICHOLAS K. GERANIOS, The Associated Press, The News Tribune (WA)

SPOKANE – A Catholic religious order that trained former priest Patrick O’Donnell can be sued by dozens of sexual abuse victims who contend the group knew O’Donnell was a pedophile and should not have recommended him for the priesthood, an appeals court has decided.

The Associated Sulpicians of the United States had asked that two lawsuits be dismissed.

That motion to dismiss was initially rejected by a state court, and the state Division 1 Court of Appeals in Seattle declined a request from the religious order that it review the lower court decision.

The court action was brought by alleged victims of O’Donnell against the now-defunct St. Thomas Seminary in the Seattle suburb of Kenmore. The seminary was operated by the Sulpicians, an order devoted to training priests.

In court depositions related to several pending lawsuits prior to the Spokane Catholic Diocese bankruptcy filing, O’Donnell admitted to molesting dozens of young boys.

Leaders of the Sulpicians did not return a telephone message seeking comment.

At the seminary, each student was assigned a “spiritual director,” a priest who oversaw the student’s development and acted as a confessor, court documents said.

O’Donnell has testified in depositions that he was open with his spiritual director about his interest in sexual contact with children and his struggle with his sexual orientation, the opinion said.

Lawyers for the seminary contended the spiritual director, identified in documents only as Father Basso, could not have shared with others what O’Donnell told him in confession. Thus there is no proof that seminary directors knew O’Donnell was a pedophile, they argued.

O’Donnell served as a priest from 1971 until 1985. At least 65 boys have accused him of abusing them, court records showed.