

# Parents often targeted first in abuse by priests

By DAVID CRARY  
Associated Press

Before sexually molesting young victims, many predatory priests psychologically seduced the parents — winning their trust to gain access to their children.

Lawyers, psychologists and victims say the initial target sometimes was a low-income single mother delighted to find a surrogate father for her son.

In other cases, however, the victim had prosperous, happily married parents whose vulnerability was simply their unwavering devotion to the Roman Catholic Church.

"It's exactly the same pattern as your typical con artist," said Robert Sherman, a Boston attorney who has handled hundreds of priest abuse complaints. "In order to be effective, they needed people to drop their guard."

Deep faith in the church has been a common denominator among the targeted families, said David Clohessy, director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

"Kids from devout families are less apt to tell anyone about the abuse," he said. "Even if the kid does tell, the parents are less apt to believe him or call a lawyer to challenge the church."

John Geoghan, the former Massachusetts priest whose serial molesting was a catalyst of the current sex-abuse scandal, often targeted boys from lower-income homes whose fathers were absent or unsupportive.

"He picked on dysfunctional families," said Mitchell Garabedian, a Boston attorney representing dozens of Geoghan's alleged victims.

Maryetta Dussourd was befriended by Geoghan in the late 1970s. She was struggling at the time to care for her children and her niece's children.

Geoghan became a regular dinner guest and offered to help out.

"It kind of eats at me now, that he came to call all the time," Dussourd said. "He told me he felt so comfortable with us — that there were only two families he'd ever felt that way about."

Dussourd sued the church in 1997, alleging that Geoghan had molested three of her sons and her niece's four sons; the church settled out of court.

Now 57, Dussourd said her sons refuse to speak to her because they oppose her decision to talk publicly about the abuse.

While Geoghan targeted hard-pressed families, Dave Lewcon said he was abused while a teen-ager in a stable, middle-class family.

"My parents were great parents," said Lewcon, 48. "It just never occurred to them to question the church. My mom was happy that I was hanging out with the priest instead of hanging out with kids downtown and getting in trouble."

Lewcon obtained a financial settlement from Catholic officials after alleging he was abused in the early 1970s by the Rev. Thomas Teczar.

"If you want to abuse kids, all you need is a great personality and you can win the loyalty of the parents," Lewcon said.

A.W. Richard Sipe, a psychotherapist and former priest, said targeted families come from every socio-economic level.

Sometimes the entrance "is gained through the mother, almost courting her — I've seen cases where a mother and daughter were abused by the same priest," Sipe said.

With reports of past abuse by priests now sweeping the nation, Catholic parents are likely to be cautious about the types of contacts their children have with the clergy. But Gary Richard Schoener, a Minneapolis psychologist, says parents of victims shouldn't blame themselves for being deceived.

"The outward behavior of many offenders is very similar to a really good youth pastor," Schoener said. "Picking out moms who need help — that's exactly what a good priest does. Someone who really loves children would do that."