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Trail of Abuse Leads to Seminary

St. John's in Camarillo fielded a disproportionate number of alleged molesters, records show, in some cases up to a third of the graduating class.

By Paul Pringle

Times Staff Writer

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Any examination of the sexual abuse crisis afflicting the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles leads inevitably to a bell-towered campus in the rolling hills of Camarillo: St. John's Seminary.

The 66-year-old institution has trained hundreds of clerics for the archdiocese and smaller jurisdictions across Southern California and beyond. It is the alma mater of Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, Diocese of Orange Bishop Tod Brown and other prominent prelates. Former San Francisco Archbishop William Levada, now the Vatican's chief enforcer of doctrine, taught at the school.

But St. John's, the only seminary operated by the archdiocese, also has produced a disproportionate number of alleged sexual abusers as it prepared men for a life of ministry and celibacy, records show.

About 10% of St. John's graduates reported to have been ordained in the Los Angeles Archdiocese since 1950 — 65 of roughly 625 — have been accused of molesting minors, according to a review of ordination announcements, lawsuits, published reports and the archdiocese's 2004 list of alleged abusers. In two classes — 1966 and 1972 — a third of the graduates were later accused of molestation.

The St. John's figures are much higher than the nationwide rate of alleged molesters in the American priesthood, as calculated by a church-commissioned survey. The John Jay College of Criminal Justice study found that 4% of priests and deacons between 1950 and 2002 have been accused of abuse.

"The numbers get scary," said Patrick Wall, a former monk who works for an Orange County law firm that represents alleged abuse victims suing the church, including about 100 who have accused St. John's graduates. "I don't think it's coincidental."

Archdiocese officials deny that the seminary was in any way responsible.

Spokesman Tod Tamberg blamed intense publicity over sexual abuse in the church for the higher rate of accusations involving St. John's graduates, and noted that a California law temporarily

lifting the statute of limitations for molestation lawsuits brought a flood of allegations against Los Angeles priests.

But J. Michael Hennigan, a lawyer for the archdiocese, conceded that exaggerated claims alone cannot account for the large numbers of alleged abusers in some graduating classes.

"There were a couple of years at that seminary where lightning struck," Hennigan said. "I doubt we'll ever figure out why."

Several former students recall a licentious atmosphere at St. John's that might have accommodated a range of sexual behavior, especially in the years before the 1990s.

They say that many classmates routinely broke their celibacy vows, that emotionally troubled students were allowed to drift through the seminary, and that administrators either were ignorant about sex on campus or turned a blind eye to it.

Some told of seminarians having sex in St. John's dormitories, bathrooms and orange groves.

"There was an awful lot that was shocking," said Jaime Romo, who lost his passion for the priesthood after three years at St. John's in the early 1980s. Now an education professor at the University of San Diego, a Catholic school, Romo has sued the Los Angeles Archdiocese, accusing the late priest Leland Boyer of molesting him as a teenager.

He remembered a small group of students who dressed in nuns' clothes during his time at St. John's, and others who were "full-blown alcoholics." He said the faculty avoided any talk of sex: "There was no discussion of celibacy."

A number of active priests who attended St. John's said they had never witnessed sexual activity at the seminary, and believed the administration would not have tolerated it. "Could guys have carried on a secret life? Sure," said Leon Hutton, a St. John's history teacher who graduated in 1980. "But it certainly wouldn't have been condoned."

The John Jay survey determined that the quarter-century from 1960 through 1984 was particularly troublesome for alleged abuse by clerics nationwide. At St. John's, about 15% of priests who graduated during that period and served in the Los Angeles Archdiocese were accused of sexual abuse, records show.

Some of the allegations have resulted in criminal convictions or civil settlements. Most are unresolved. The accusations lodged in civil complaints have not been formally denied because the suits are the subject of a court mediation, Hennigan said.

Typically, the suits focus on incidents that allegedly occurred after a priest left the seminary. But in a 2003 suit, Esther Miller alleges that a seminarian sexually abused her at St. John's in the mid-1970s.

Miller, now a human resources manager, accuses former priest Michael Nocita of molesting her when she was 16 and 17 while he was a deacon seminarian assigned to her family's parish in Van Nuys.

The suit, which names the archdiocese rather than Nocita as a defendant, also alleges that St. John's then-rector, John Grindel, once saw Nocita embracing her in his dorm room but did not ask why

she was there.

"He just closed the door," said Miller, who says that Nocita molested her in the dorm and the orange groves.

Attempts to reach Nocita and Grindel for comment were unsuccessful. They have not responded formally to the lawsuits because of the mediation process, Hennigan said.

Other suits allege that a St. John's student molested three sisters — ages 6 to 15 — while visiting their home as part of a "field pastoral education" program in the early 1980s. The lawsuits do not identify the student.

Wayne Yehling, a Tucson attorney who received a philosophy degree from St. John's now-closed undergraduate college in 1982, said most of his classmates had been committed to celibacy, but "there was a great deal of sexual activity among students. I saw it, and yes, I participated in it." Yehling said he had a sexual relationship with another student for most of his three years at St. John's.

"It was like shooting fish in a barrel to seduce somebody there," he said of the college, a gateway to the graduate theology school. "You learned to hide what you do."

Yehling and others noted that engaging in consensual sex at the seminary and molesting minors were hugely different things, and said no link between them should be inferred.

They also said, however, that St. John's administrators and teachers had appeared so oblivious to sex on campus that it would have been possible for students who exhibited sexually abusive behavior to go unchecked while at the school.

Fred Berlin, an associate professor of psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, said if a "subculture of permissiveness" had taken hold at St. John's, students prone to molestation might have found it easier to succumb to their desires.

"We often see that people, when they get into these group situations, will sometimes behave in ways they might not otherwise behave," said Berlin, an expert on sexual disorders.

Berlin said he knew of cases in which young men tormented by their sexual urges entered seminaries in the hope that a celibacy vow would still their impulses.

"When they get there," he said, "it's a very different reality."

Robert Greene, who left St. John's undergraduate college in 1972 after a year, said the vast majority of students took their vocation seriously. "But many people seemed almost preadolescent.... They were pretty much shipped through the system in this kind of numb state." He said the seminary "did a disservice by not emphasizing spiritual and psychological development."

Greene, a part-time Anglican minister who works in aerospace finance, said he quit the seminary because Robert Manning, who was serving as a visiting cleric at Greene's Redondo Beach parish, had been molesting him.

"He would pick me up at St. John's and take me home," said Greene, who has sued the church, alleging that Manning began to abuse him in high school.

Archdiocese officials have labeled Manning a "bogus priest," saying they cannot confirm that he was ordained. He is not a defendant in the suit and could not be reached for comment.

Luis Godinez, who briefly attended St. John's in the late 1980s, said he left because he was offended by the promiscuity on campus.

He said he often could not use his dorm bathroom at night because it was occupied by men having sex.

In 2003, Godinez sued the church, alleging that Stockton priest Fernando Villalobos, who died in 1985, had molested him as a boy. The suit is pending.

During the 1970s and '80s, St. John's sometimes played host to a Tucson priest, Robert Trupia, who brought young men interested in becoming priests to the seminary as part of his "Come and See" program, according to court documents.

Arizona authorities arrested Trupia on child molestation charges in 2000, but dropped the case because of the statute of limitations.

In 2002, the church paid a multimillion-dollar settlement to nine former altar boys and another alleged victim who accused Trupia and three other Arizona priests of molestation.

The mother of one boy who was a witness in the case wrote to church officials that her son had an "especially painful memory" of spending two nights at St. John's with Trupia, and waking to find the priest sitting on the child's bed.

"The bedcovers were pulled down but [he] doesn't know or remember if Trupia touched him while he slept," the mother wrote. "He does know that the door to his room was locked.... The door wasn't locked when he went to bed."

Hennigan said the archdiocese found that Trupia had been "discouraged from further visits to St. John's," but there was no record of the reason. "We heard he was banned," he said.

Msgr. James Gehl, who was at St. John's for eight years ending in 1974, first at the undergraduate college and then in the theology school, said he saw nothing of the sexually charged environment others describe. "I'm not saying there weren't [instances of sexual activity], but I never heard of one," he said. "Sometimes people were dismissed, and we were never given the reason."

Gehl, now pastor at St. Bede the Venerable in La Cañada Flintridge, said it "blew me away" to learn of abuse allegations against a former classmate and a second St. John's graduate with whom Gehl shared a church residence for three years in Palmdale. "I never would have guessed," he said.

Back then, he said, there was little if any psychological vetting of students: "When I went to the seminary college, I just went from 12th grade to 13th grade. I don't remember being interviewed in any psychological way."

"We were all ignorant," said the Rev. Msgr. Helmut Hefner, a 1969 St. John's graduate who is rector of the seminary. "I went to school with people who subsequently became abusers. I couldn't tell. There was no hint."

Hefner said a reluctance by seminaries to aggressively address sexual matters in the 1960s and '70s might have inadvertently opened the door to a few young men with abusive tendencies. "Sexual issues were taboo," he said.

Seminaries have since adopted tougher measures to weed out candidates who might have a predilection for perversions, and Hefner says the regimen of background checks, psychological tests and celibacy counseling is working.

"It's gotten more sophisticated," he said. "We are much more aware of the risk factors."

He sees a bright future for St. John's. Enrollment has been holding steady at about 100, he said.

The archdiocese is selling 60 of St. John's 100 acres to developers, with the proceeds to secure the seminary's endowment.

Like other seminaries, however, St. John's has been laboring to reverse a decline in its output of priests, a trend that resulted in the 2003 closure of the undergraduate school.

Its ordinations have lagged far behind the growth in the Los Angeles Archdiocese, the nation's most populous with 5 million Catholics.

Today's student body, Hefner said, is about half foreign-born with an average age of 34. He said any problems of immaturity, sexual and otherwise, have disappeared.

"The scandals have only kind of encouraged people to work harder at what we're about," Hefner said.

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The Process

The Los Angeles Archdiocese said it did not have a comprehensive roster of St. John's graduates. It also declined to provide The Times with access to the campus or to photographs of graduating classes. For those reasons, The Times relied on ordination stories published annually in the archdiocesan newspaper, the Tidings — an approach that church officials said would yield accurate results.

The stories listed the names of about 620 St. John's priests who were ordained in the archdiocese since 1950. Several more graduates were identified in legal documents and in interviews with church officials and former St. John's students.

Some St. John's graduates were ordained into dioceses outside Los Angeles. Repeated attempts to obtain a complete list of these graduates were unsuccessful. Priests ordained into the Los Angeles Archdiocese were recruited and sponsored for the seminary by the archdiocese.

All the names were checked against those in the archdiocese's 2004 report on alleged abusers, news accounts of molestation cases, and in some instances, court documents and supporting materials.

From that process, The Times found 65 Los Angeles priests ordained from St. John's since 1950

who have faced abuse allegations.

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