

Catholic sexual abuse suits now include nuns

BY ELLEN R. STAPLETON
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LOUISVILLE, Ky. — The sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church has focused primarily on molestation by priests, but in Louisville, two dozen people are now suing an order of nuns that staffed an orphanage decades ago.

The allegations include some accusing nuns of molestation as well as charges against a now-deceased priest. While experts agree the incidence of abuse by nuns has been much less frequent than assaults by male clergy, the phenomenon has gained some attention recently.

The initial Kentucky lawsuit against the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth was brought by seven plaintiffs July 15, just over a year after 243 people reached a \$25.7 million abuse settlement with the Archdiocese of Louisville.

Some plaintiffs have accused the Rev. Herman J. Lammers of molesting or raping them. He was a longtime Catholic Charities director who served as the resident chaplain at St. Thomas-St. Vincent Orphanage, which the sisters ran from 1952 until it closed in 1983. Lammers died in 1986.

But there are also allegations against about a dozen nuns. Almost all those plaintiffs, ages 38 to 72, are women who claim the sisters molested them and beat them with leather straps while they lived at the orphanage, sometimes making them stand naked in front of others or locking them in closets without food.

"As women, they should want to protect children," said 30-year-old Landa Mauriello-Vernon of Hamden, Conn., who has an unrelated lawsuit pend-



AP PHOTO
Attorney William F. McMurry represents some of more than 20 people who claim they were abused at the St. Thomas-St. Vincent Orphanage in Anchorage, Ky., decades ago.

ing against a nun and the Catholic school she attended in New England.

Mauriello-Vernon is leading a national awareness campaign for the Survivors Network for Those Abused by Priests. The group demonstrated in Maryland earlier this month, asking the Leadership Conference of Women Religious to allow victims to speak at the group's national gathering later this month in Texas.

"What we're really doing is reaching out to the victims and educating parents and grandparents that not all women are safe," Mauriello-Vernon said. "But I think our country will have a pretty hard time hearing that."

There have been several other examples of lawsuits targeting nuns. A Boston suit filed in May included allegations by nine peo-

ple who said they were abused by more than a dozen nuns at a Catholic school for the deaf.

Jeff Anderson, a Minnesota attorney, said he has represented more than 1,000 people over 22 years in cases involving priests or religious men, but has only handled about a half-dozen involving nuns.

"That tells you something. The whole phenomenon of nuns abusing is somewhat recent," said Anderson, who believes many nuns who abused minors were exploited by male clergy themselves.

The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth is a 192-year-old order of 650 nuns that provides education, health care and social services in the United States, India, Belize, Nepal and Botswana. Spokeswoman Barbara Qualls said the community has had as

many as 1,600 nuns.

The order and its attorney have denied that they have any evidence of abuse or a cover-up at the orphanage — which was owned by the archdiocese through Catholic Charities — or at three schools which are mentioned in the suits.

"We are very grieved at the memories of any individual of this nature. We want to cooperate in any way we can," Qualls said. "We are also grieved at the memory of our own deceased sisters, who are indeed innocent until proven guilty."

The order's sexual abuse policy, approved in February 2003, requires an accused nun to be removed from her ministry while a full investigation is conducted. Only one sister named in the lawsuits, Mary Jane Rhodes, is living and still part of the community.

William McMurry, who orchestrated last year's settlement with the archdiocese, said the alleged abuse at the orphanage is far worse than priests who preyed on young parishioners.

"When I reflect on the 243 victims in the archdiocese case, the horrors that occurred here are far more frightening because those children had a home to at least retreat to, but instead these were captives living a child's nightmare," said McMurry, who is representing most plaintiffs in the new suit.

McMurry said the orphanage could hold up to 450 children at one time, meaning the number of people suing the nuns could be high. The initial plaintiffs were five biological sisters who were reunited this spring after a half-century and realized they shared similar abuse.

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