

Catholic Order Agrees to Settle Sex-Abuse Suits for \$50 Million

By Mary Pemberton
Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — A Roman Catholic religious order has agreed to pay \$50 million to dozens of Alaska Natives who were victims of sexual abuse by Jesuit priests, their lawyer said.

The settlement with the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus is the largest one against a Catholic religious order, said Anchorage lawyer Ken Roosa.

However, the superior of the Oregon Province called the announcement premature. The Oregon-based province covers Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana and Alaska.

He called the settlement "a great day" for the victims in which the truth of what had occurred over many years was recognized.

"These are people who were altar boys and altar servers and altar girls," Roosa said. "These are people who tried to tell their story and in many instances were beaten or told to shut up and told, 'How can you say such things about a man of God?'"

The settlement announcement, made this week, is premature because some issues need to be finalized, said Monsignor John Whitney, provincial superior of the Oregon Province.

"When those issues are resolved, we will be available for a more complete discussion of the matter," Whitney said in a prepared statement.

He described the settlement announcement as "premature and detrimental."

Roosa said issues involving the plaintiffs had been resolved. The only issues that remained were with the religious order's insurer, he said.

He provided The Associated

Press with an e-mail sent from Dick Hansen, the lawyer representing the religious order.

The e-mail reads, "This e-mail will confirm that a settlement has been reached. ... The settlement calls for \$50,000,000 to be paid to the plaintiffs/claimants in exchange for releases of all claims against the Jesuit defendants."

In the e-mail, Hansen says he's glad to "put this matter to rest."

The sexual abuse involved 13 or 14 clerics and spanned 30 years, from 1961 to 1987, Roosa said. The ages of the children ranged from 5 to teenagers.

Roosa said the victims are now in their 30s, 40s and 50s.

In some villages, it is difficult to find an adult who was not sexually violated by the priests, who then used religion and their power to silence hundreds of children, Roosa said.

"Despite all this, no Catholic religious leader has yet to admit that problem priests were dumped in Alaska. For our clients, this settlement represents a long-overdue acknowledgment of the truth of their stories of abuse, stories that until today were largely denied and belittled by apologists for the abusers," he said.

Dick Hansen, the lawyer representing the religious order, did not immediately return a call for comment.

Roosa said the Catholic Church first was notified of the Alaska cases of abuse in 2002.

The cases include those involving the Rev. James Poole, founder of Catholic radio station KNOM in Nome, Alaska. Poole, who lives in an assisted-living facility in Spokane, Wash., worked in a number of towns and villages in rural Alaska.