

Ex-Priests Facing Abuse Charges Are Freed From Los Angeles Jail

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Two former Roman Catholic priests have been released from jail after a United States Supreme Court decision invalidated a California law extending the statute of limitations on decades-old child molestation cases.

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The men, Michael Wempe, 63, and Lawrence Joseph Lovell, 55, were released on Friday. They were among 11 priests in Los Angeles County whose charges will probably be dismissed because they were brought under the law that has been invalidated.

"These priests are being released on a technicality that has nothing to do with whether the crime was committed or not," said Mary Grant of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests. Members of that organization held a news conference outside a state office building to protest Thursday's ruling.

The decision struck down that part of a California law that allowed prosecutions of people accused of committing sex crimes many years ago, after old statutes of limitations had expired. But the ruling does not affect prosecutions for offenses committed after the law expanding the time limits took effect. So it would be possible for a person to be prosecuted 20 years from now for an offense committed in 1993 or after.

State authorities say about 800 cases will have to be reviewed.

Sandi Gibbons, spokeswoman for District Attorney Steve Cooley, said prosecutors were gathering files and holding meetings to "determine if any of the cases can be salvaged."

Mr. Wempe's lawyer, Leonard Levine, said his client had always denied the charges. Mr. Wempe was to be arraigned on July 8, but Mr. Levine said he hoped the charges would be dismissed before that.

"There are going to be a lot of people released from prison," Mr. Levine said.