

AN 'ARIZONA REPUBLIC' ANALYSIS EXAMINES THE HISTORIES OF SEXUAL ABUSE AND HARASSMENT IN THE PHOENIX DIOCESE PRIESTS WITH TROUBLED PASTS

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Authors: Joseph A. Reaves and Kelly

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Priests accused of sexual abuse or harassment worked in nearly half of all parishes in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Phoenix during the past three decades, according to an analysis of public records compiled by The Arizona Republic.

The analysis reveals that church leaders often dealt with allegations of sexual abuse by reassigning priests rather than disciplining them and that some of the worst repeat offenders were transferred into predominantly Hispanic parishes.

Those practices, which put children at risk and in some cases led to abuse that could have been stopped, began long before Bishop Thomas O'Brien came to power in 1982.

In fact, some of the most-troubling policies can be tied directly to O'Brien's predecessor, James Rausch, one-time head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, who spent his last years leading the Phoenix Diocese.

But records show O'Brien failed to correct many problems he inherited from Rausch while vowing publicly to bring about change.

"Bishop O'Brien has done nothing to help the more than three dozen local victims of clergy abuse in our group," said Paul Pfaffenberger, head of the Valley chapter of the national support group SNAP, the Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests.

"We believe he is directly responsible for reassigning known pedophile priests to parishes and schools where they had access to children."

O'Brien and some of his top aides have been swept up in an 11-month criminal investigation into how they handled allegations of sexual abuse by priests. That investigation, by Maricopa County Attorney Rick Romley, is locked in grand jury secrecy and is likely to continue into late summer or early fall.

O'Brien declined to be interviewed for this article, which draws on court records, police reports, sworn depositions, church law and scores of interviews. But his spokeswoman, Kim Sue Lia Perkes, issued a brief statement Friday.

"It is difficult for us to answer any specific questions due to the grand jury investigation that virtually bars us from publicly speaking about any details," she wrote.

"Bishop O'Brien is committed to ensuring that the church provide the safest environment possible for the children of the diocese. He has apologized on numerous occasions, publicly and privately, to Catholics for any mistakes he may have made."

An analysis of The Republic's database reveals that:

- * Priests accused of sexual misconduct at some point during their careers were assigned to at least 42 of the 88 parishes in the Phoenix Diocese from 1970 to 2002.

- * At least three parochial schools and a Catholic university center were assigned priests who either eventually were removed from ministry or indicted on criminal charges.

- * One priest accused of sexual misconduct worked in nine parishes, and half of all priests who faced abuse allegations worked in three or more parishes in the diocese.

- * 10 of the 12 largest Hispanic parishes were exposed to priests who were accused some time during their career of sexual misconduct, including some of the worst offenders.

"This shows that the bishop has not protected his flock," said Juanita Encinas, 48, a lifelong member of St. Mary's in Chandler, one of the largest Hispanic parishes in the diocese.

"I wonder how many more kids are out there who had an experience with these priests."

Scope of danger

The 42 parishes exposed to troubled priests account for 48 percent of the parishes in the diocese. But the number may grow because, so far, only 24 priests or former priests accused of sexual misconduct have been identified through public records or by church officials.

O'Brien told The Republic in November that at least 50 priests, former priests and church employees were accused of molesting children in the past 30 years. He refused to identify them, citing privacy concerns.

The full scope of danger to children and whether the Phoenix Diocese was a common destination for troubled priests can't be known until all abusive church employees are named.

"I don't like the idea that the church hierarchy is getting away with it," said Mary Jayne Benton, head of the 450-member Arizona chapter of Call to Action, an organization committed to church reform and renewal.

"It just seems to me," she said, "that if this isn't in the news, the church thinks it's gone, it's past, that people aren't going to be upset. I think they feel it's over with. And it isn't."

The sex abuse scandal made headlines for several months last year after Romley announced in May that he was launching a criminal investigation.

At least two grand juries meeting in secret for 11 months have returned just two indictments, against a priest and a former priest, involving sexual misconduct that took place decades ago.

The former priest, John Maurice Giandelone, was sentenced in March to 22 months in prison

for molesting a former altar boy. But a separate indictment against the Rev. Patrick Colleary was quashed because the surprise discovery of a long-lost police report meant the statute of limitations had expired.

In both cases, victims and their families told the media and their attorneys that O'Brien encouraged them to keep their allegations private and promised to transfer the accused priests. And, in both cases, the priests were accused of other acts of misconduct after being transferred.

Since those indictments were handed up in December, the tone of the investigation has changed. Romley announced last month that he planned to keep any future indictments of individual priests sealed until he determined whether senior church officials played a role in covering up sexual abuse.

Hispanics and students

The Republic's analysis shows that sexually abusive priests worked in a wide range of parishes, from some of the smallest to many of the largest. Almost every corner of the diocese was affected, from Sun City to Seligman and Phoenix to Flagstaff.

Of the 24 priests accused of sexual misconduct, 11 worked in heavily Hispanic parishes. Those priests worked in 10 of the 12 parishes with the highest numbers of Hispanic faithful.

Three independent parochial schools in the diocese -- Xavier Prep and St. Mary's in Phoenix and Seton Catholic High in Chandler -- were exposed to troubled priests, as were students at the Newman Center at Northern Arizona University.

The priest who worked at NAU was the Rev. Harold Graf, who still enjoys strong support from former parishioners nearly a year after O'Brien permanently banned him for what the bishop would only say was sexual misconduct with a child.

Diocesan records show that Graf was assigned to nine parishes and the Newman Center at NAU before his dismissal. He also was listed for one year, 1992, as "unassigned," a category used for a variety of reasons including psychological treatment and personal or legal problems. The majority of priests known so far to have histories of sexual misconduct were placed on the unassigned list at one time or another during their careers.

Graf was unavailable for comment, but friends and former parishioners continue to insist his punishment was far too harsh for what they believe was a single indiscretion years ago. They have formed a group called Concerned Catholics for Fr. Graf and are trying to have him reinstated.

Graf is the only active priest O'Brien has permanently barred from ministry since the bishop vowed in June to "lead the nation" in cleaning up the scandal. Two others who had been suspended years earlier for sexual misconduct also had their priestly privileges permanently lifted last June.

Sitting ducks

Rank-and-file Catholics have become increasingly aggressive about dealing with abusive priests and church leaders who protect them.

In one example, vacationing Catholics from Minnesota learned last year that a priest who was sued three times on allegations he molested men and boys in their home state was celebrating Mass at All Saints Church in Mesa.

The priest, Gilbert DeSutter, retired to Arizona, and the Phoenix Diocese placed a notice in its internal newsletter advising local parishes that he "may not exercise ministry."

But apparently little was done to follow up that notice. The vacationing Minnesotans said they were shocked when they saw him celebrating Mass and giving sacraments to patients at a Valley hospice.

"You guys (in Phoenix) are sitting ducks for whoever in the country wants to come out and hide out," Minnesota nurse Deb Anderson said.

DeSutter still lives in Mesa. When The Republic contacted him last week, he said he had been faithful to his vows his entire life and hung up.

Another recent case involving Flagstaff priest John Picardi raises concerns that bishops in other parts of the country saw the Phoenix Diocese as a safe place to transfer troubled priests.

Picardi was assigned to the Boston Archdiocese in 1992 when church records show he was accused of raping an adult male during a vacation to Florida. Three years later, after a transfer to New Jersey, Picardi was accused of fondling a 12-year-old girl. He was banned from working in that state after church officials concluded government investigators determined Picardi "did what he was accused of doing."

A sex abuse review panel in Boston recommended Picardi be permanently removed from public ministry, but he appealed and won, records show, in part because Boston Cardinal Bernard Law told investigators to ignore the rape allegations.

Two weeks after winning his appeal, Picardi asked permission to return to ministry in Phoenix, where he was living in a home owned by the Rev. Thomas Zazella, a senior official of the Diocese of Paterson, N.J.

Cardinal Law wrote O'Brien supporting Picardi's request to return to ministry and, within days, O'Brien assigned the priest to St. Maria Goretti parish in Scottsdale. He worked there from October 1997 to July 2001, when he was transferred to San Francisco de Asis parish in Flagstaff.

Picardi's past troubles became public in January when a Massachusetts judge ordered thousands of confidential church records released as part of the ongoing legal case against the Boston Archdiocese.

O'Brien quickly removed Picardi from public ministry in January and said he had been unaware of the allegations. But a confidential letter obtained by The Republic from the released documents indicates O'Brien was told as early as May 13, 1997, about Picardi's past.

"I have spoken to Bishop O'Brien in Phoenix," reads the letter from a top aide to Boston's Cardinal Law. "I have sent Bishop O'Brien three evaluations, which John received in 1992 and 1995. I have also summarized John's recent past and the conclusions of both civil authorities and our Review Board."

Victims' advocates say the release of those kinds of letters from confidential church files in Boston, and thousands more unsealed by a judge's order in New Hampshire last month, reinforce long-festering suspicions about some church leaders.

"Victims and their families were deceived, confused, ignored, not given credence or discouraged," said Richard Sipe, an ex-priest from San Diego who has spent 25 years interviewing clergy to compile 1,500 case studies of sex abuse in the church.

Less restrictive

Another confidential memo from Law to O'Brien in 1996 raises more questions about how well priests were scrutinized in the Phoenix Diocese.

That memo, dated June 26, 1996, first mentioned Picardi's desire to relocate to a new diocese, a process that required him to be "excardinated" from service to Archbishop Law in Boston and "incardinated" into the service of a new bishop.

"If Father Picardi finds a bishop who is willing to incardinate him, and we are able to share everything we know about Father Picardi's situation, then you could allow him to be excardinated," the memo read.

"This would have to be done on the spot without a probationary period. There seem to be dioceses with policies that are less restrictive than ours. Perhaps another bishop would be willing to take a chance."

That bishop turned out to be O'Brien, who continues to insist through his spokeswoman that he never got the full details of Picardi's past until last year and considered the rape incident nothing more than "a consensual, though regrettable," sexual encounter.

Police records and lawsuits show Picardi wasn't the only troubled priest who transferred into the Phoenix Diocese. Others came from Minnesota, California, Indiana, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Wisconsin.

Rapid growth of the church in Phoenix and a shortage of priests has forced O'Brien to rely on a steady supply of clergy brought in from outside the diocese. Such priests are known in the church as "extern" priests.

Chris Gunty, a diocese spokesman, said 25 of the 201 priests on active duty as of last month were externs.

Only a small fraction of extern priests have any history of sexual abuse. But even within the church, extern priests are viewed differently than those ordained by a local diocese.

"If you are a bishop, are you going to send the best men you've got?" said Andre Boulanger, 68, a retired Phoenix priest. "You're going to have all these externs coming in, and you're going to have a higher number of problems."

Confidential records

Besides Picardi and DeSutter, other priests with troubled pasts have been allowed to work in the Phoenix Diocese in recent years.

A prime example was the Rev. Marvin Knighton, who served as an administrator at prestigious St. Mary's High School in downtown Phoenix during the 2000-01 school year. He was accused of molesting a young man in Milwaukee in the late 1980s and is scheduled to stand trial in July on a charge of second-degree sexual assault of a child.

In Knighton's case, as with Picardi and others, O'Brien said he was unaware of the allegations. He said he relied on letters of recommendation from other bishops and church law may support his claim.

Canon Law, which governs the church, requires that confidential personnel records be transferred only from one diocese to another when a priest applies for permanent leave. Because most extern priests are temporarily assigned, their private files are kept in their home diocese.

In Phoenix in recent months, one priest and at least three sex abuse victims have said publicly that O'Brien admonished them to keep silent and warned them against going to civil authorities.

The allegations involve abuse that took place decades ago and O'Brien's handling of the cases both before and after he became bishop.

In at least two cases, records show, O'Brien either transferred or helped arrange the transfer of abusive priests who went on to abuse other children.

"O'Brien ruined my family's life for 30 years because of the way he handled our case," said Joseph Delgado, an Arizona Department of Public Safety officer, whose brother was sodomized in 1975 by a Franciscan brother in Phoenix.

Delgado said O'Brien, then vicar general of the diocese, told the family to keep silent about the attack and promised he would transfer the brother. He said his brother was so traumatized by the molestation and cover-up that he spent years in therapy and attempted suicide more than a dozen times.

The diocese later agreed to pay for some counseling for Delgado's brother and gave him \$4,000 in a confidential settlement that the family wants the church to overturn.

Another police officer, Mesa Lt. Ben Kulina, said family members also were told to keep quiet when they reported his molestation by another priest in 1980. O'Brien transferred that priest to a new parish where court records show he molested another boy one year later.

Change and regret

The Delgado and Kulina cases were indicative of the way many abuse allegations were handled for decades, both within the Phoenix Diocese and across the nation.

But in 1990, O'Brien signaled a change, bringing together parishioners, psychological experts and church officials to draft what he promised would be the nation's most comprehensive policy on sex abuse.

The group's "Policy on Sexual Misconduct by Diocesan Personnel" was enacted in 1991 and revised in 1995.

In December 1998, O'Brien drew nationwide praise for issuing a surprise blanket apology for past sins in handling sex abuse cases.

Those remarks were a dramatic turnaround from the policies and attitudes of the 1970s and early '80s when O'Brien was Rausch's vicar general.

"Twenty years ago, these topics weren't discussed in the church or in society," said the Rev. Chris Carpenter, pastor of Christ the King Catholic Church in Mesa.

"People weren't talking about sexual abuse over the water cooler as they are today. We can learn from that cover-up mentality of the past. We don't do anybody any favors by looking the other way."

Carpenter, one of the few priests willing to speak on the record about the sex scandal, said O'Brien has been meeting with priests in small groups recently to discuss the controversy. He said O'Brien has been asked about the possibility he might resign and rejected it.

"I think the priests are supportive of him, realizing that he's done the best that he's able to do either because of his own education or the generation he came from in handling these cases," Carpenter said. "Most of us are convinced that he's done the best he could do."

O'Brien is a slight, gentle man who entered the seminary at age 13. By all accounts, he abhors controversy, and friends say his health has suffered under the pressure of the scandal and lingering grand jury investigation.

"We pray for him, for his health, and pray that he will be able to make a decision to let go, both for his own health and the health of the diocese," said Benton of Arizona Call to Action.

O'Brien welcomes those prayers, but said last month that he doesn't need forgiveness for his handling of sex abuse cases in his diocese.

"My conscience is clear," he said on the steps of St. Mary's Basilica. "We have done what we can."

ABOUT THIS STORY

To get a more complete picture of the scope of sexual misconduct in the Phoenix Diocese, The Arizona Republic assembled 33 years of official church directories and used them to compile a database of more than 700 priests who have worked in the diocese since its founding Dec. 2, 1969. Those names were cross-checked with thousands of pages of public records identifying priests accused of sex-related offenses. Republic staffer Ryan Konig assembled the database and supervised the statistical analysis.