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By CHRIS KNAP  
and RACHANEE SRISAVASDI  
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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Now it appears that Poole may have been too casual – and not at all disciplined.

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# ALASKA: Tiny towns, natives' trust make state 'pedophile's dream'

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pregnated anyone.

Four Catholic priests and one brother have been accused of abuse in western Alaska between 1965 and 1985. Although the number of accused is small, the cases are startling for the number of plaintiffs – 18 times as many per capita as in Orange County.

Eighty-seven claimants settled with the Diocese of Orange last month for \$100 million – one claimant for every 4,800 Catholics. In the Diocese of Fairbanks, 58 people have come forward so far – one claimant out of every 270 Catholics. Most are Yupik or Inupiak Eskimos, or Athabascan Indians.

Tribal leaders, anthropologists and the claimants say this abuse scandal reverberates with aspects of colonialism. In the early 20th century, Alaska was divided up among religious denominations. The priests who came to the villages along the Yukon River and the Bering Sea became powerful figures. Some would abuse that power.

Dr. Alan Boraas, an anthropologist at Kenai Peninsula College, calls the abuse “a repressed part of the Alaskan history.”

Miranda Wright, an Athabascan community leader and professor at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, said there are far more than 58 victims and many will never come forward.

“It’s a very sensitive and delicate matter. It’s a personal shame, an anger – something they don’t want to discuss in public,” Wright said.

“On the part of the larger community, I think the betrayal is what hurts so much more. These people were there to teach about morality, and yet they themselves were such hypocrites. It’s just another slap in the face for Alaskan natives and native Americans.”

Donald Kettler, who became the bishop of Fairbanks in 2002, said he is disturbed by the large number of complainants. He is worried about the effect on the diocese’s mission and its finances.

“The most important thing to know is that we are talking about things that happened 30 or 40 years ago,” Kettler said. “During this same period of time, there have been 400 priests in this diocese and 1,000 volunteers. Most of them have served faithfully and well.”

Now 83 and living in a Jesuit retirement home in Spokane, Wash., Poole did not respond to requests for an interview.

But his admissions have caused the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus – the Jesuits who work in Alaska – to settle one claim for \$332,000.

A second settlement, with a woman who says Poole French-kissed and fondled her hundreds of times when she was between ages 10 and 19, is in the final stages of settlement. Both sides say payments in that case could total \$1 million.

The third case against Poole



PHOTOS COURTESY: JESUIT OREGON PROVINCE ARCHIVES, GONZAGA UNIVERSITY

Jim Poole at controls of KNOM Radio, Nome, Alaska, 1973. At left, by the broadcast tower in 1975.



may not be disposed of so easily. Poole denies procuring an abortion, one of the most serious canonical crimes.

Western Alaska is the last Catholic missionary diocese in the United States. The Jesuits minister to natives in isolated villages often too poor to support a parish. The Diocese of Fairbanks covers 410,000 square miles, from the Alaska Range north to the pole, and the Canadian border west to the Bering Sea. There is no contiguous road system. Until satellite phones came of age in the 1990s, there were few telephones.

For many natives the church has meant comfort, spiritual enrichment and education. But some villages were not so lucky. In Hooper Bay, St. Mary's, Stebbins and St. Michael, four dozen people have said they were abused.

There are also accusations that Jesuit priest Jules Convert abused 18 young boys. The Jesuits have settled with 15 for approximately \$5 million.

Some claimants allege that Joseph Lundowski, a church worker who officials say might have falsely portrayed himself as a Trappist monk, abused 28.

Both Convert and Lundowski are dead.

Ken Roosa, a former Anchorage sex-crimes prosecutor, said he has been overwhelmed by the number of

villagers with claims of abuse. Two years ago, after reading about a record \$5.2 million abuse settlement negotiated by Manly, he asked the Orange County attorney to help. Roosa has filed 57 lawsuits and says more are coming.

“You send a molester out to an isolated village on the Bering Sea Coast. The priest was the most educated person there – their lawyer, their interpreter, their confessor. He baptized them, married them. He was the emperor of the village,” Roosa said. “And there was no one for them to complain to.”

David Clohessy, executive director of Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, flew to Alaska last year to meet with abuse plaintiffs. Clohessy called Alaska a “pedophile’s dream world” because of the isolated villages and high regard in which the natives hold clergy.

“These are small villages where privacy is valued and fragile, making people less apt to report abuse,” he said. “Because these villages are so remote, a molester can more easily be undetected and abuse a higher percentage of kids.”

Patricia Hess, an Inupiak who received a \$332,000 set-

tlement last year after she said Poole abused her when she was 13 and 14, said she decided to come forward after seeing a news story about another claimant.

“Natives are happy, easygoing by nature. They are always willing to help. (Priests) used that trust to abuse them,” Hess said. “Poole used the faith, the church, to do what he wanted to victims.”

Concerns that Jesuit attitudes toward indigenous people might have facilitated the abuse were underscored last year by comments made by William Loyens, a former Jesuit leader and anthropologist.

In a deposition, Loyens said sexual abuse would not affect an indigenous person as much as someone from Spokane or Fairbanks because Athabascans and Yupiks “were fairly loose on sexual matters.”

Manly, who conducted the deposition, was so outraged that he released the transcript to The Associated Press. After an explosion of criticism, Loyens apologized to the Tanana Chiefs, saying he did not mean to imply that Indians would not be hurt by sexual abuse, or that it was not sinful and reprehensible.

“This is a Third World ex-

istence. The priests are out in the middle of nowhere. They don’t have a lot of supervision. We did the best we could,” said Pat Ford, chief of staff for the Jesuits’ Oregon Province.

“We realize that we have some failures, and we have some failures in common with our church throughout the United States. Those will be contextualized by the need and the willingness of the Jesuits to seek forgiveness, and the willingness of the people of God to forgive us.”

While the Jesuits settle cases, the Diocese of Fairbanks is battling to reduce its liability, appealing to the Alaska Supreme Court over a law that removed the statute of limitations on civil claims about sex abuse.

Kettler did not apologize for that strategy, saying Fairbanks is a diocese with very few resources.

“Do we have \$400 million worth of assets like Orange County? No. We have to handle things given our circumstances as a missionary diocese. Is that an attempt to downplay the difficulties? I don’t think so. I think we are trying to do what we realistically can do.”

The church and its accusers remain sharply divided over whether the abuse could have been stopped. Roosa says he has evidence that the diocese and the Jesuits were warned decades ago of suspicious behavior by some priests. The diocese and the Jesuits say their files contain no warnings of sexual improprieties.

Poole’s case illustrates how the lawyers and priests see the same events differently.

Roosa says a Jesuit volunteer warned the diocese in the early 1960s that Poole was spending too much time alone with young girls at St. Mary’s. The Jesuits confirm that an Ursuline nun gave a similar warning.

A book by a Jesuit historian, “The KNOM/Father Jim Poole Story,” describes how Poole was “quite unexpectedly” re-

moved from St. Mary’s in 1964 and sent back to Portland, Ore., where he spent a year teaching in an all-boys school in a “not much sought-after job.”

“I thought the end of the world had come,” Poole says in the book.

After a year in Portland, he was sent to remote Barrow, the northernmost village in Alaska. A year later, he was sent to Nome, where he founded the radio mission.

Roosa says the transfers show the Jesuits knew of the abuse.

“That’s simply not the case,” Ford said. “The sisters did not complain about sexual impropriety on Poole’s part. He used to spend some time counseling students. I think the allegation was that he spent too much time with them.”

Ford added: “We have never moved around people who were suspected or accused of abuse. That’s not our policy, and we didn’t do it here.”

But Roosa said the Jesuits are denying the obvious – and he suspects there is more in their secret files.

“As you look in the documents that we do have, you find many broad hints. ... The abuse could have easily been prevented had there been just a modicum of concern.”

Elsie Boudreau is the woman identified in court papers as “Jane Doe,” the Yupik who is close to a settlement of her suit alleging nine years of abuse by Poole.

Boudreau said her lawsuit, and her decision this week to let her name be published, are part of a healing process that has helped her set aside the feelings of guilt and shame that have tortured her for 25 years – especially when she goes to Mass.

That process was helped when she saw Poole last year at his deposition in Spokane. She said Poole looked smaller, a shell of a man, although the familiar smell of his body and breath made it difficult for her to stay in the room.

“He used me to gratify his own needs,” Boudreau said. “For a long, long time I thought it happened because I was a bad person or wrong or weak. I have been able to take that blame out of me and put it back on him. I did nothing wrong. He took advantage of my vulnerability ... and the fact that I was a child.”

Boudreau has asked that the church set aside land at St. Mary’s Mission, at the mouth of the Andreafsky River, near the Yukon, for a statue commemorating abuse victims.

She imagines a statue of a boy and a girl with a puppy.

“We want an acknowledgment of the harm that has been done to the native Alaskans ... and a place for healing,” Boudreau said.

The church has agreed.

Register staff writer Tony Saa-vedra contributed to this report.

CONTACT THE WRITER:  
(714) 796-2240 or  
cknap@ocregister.com  
(714) 834-3773 or  
rsrisavadi@ocregister.com