

## **6 allege abuse at Catholic home**

### **Suits claim rapes and beatings by priests, nuns or staff in '60s**

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By Bruce Nolan

**Staff writer**

Half a dozen men have filed lawsuits alleging they were sexually molested, beaten and frequently humiliated 40 years ago by nuns, priests and civilian staff members at Madonna Manor, a Catholic home for troubled children in Marrero.

The six lawsuits represent the largest concentration of complaints involving a single institution or individual in the Archdiocese of New Orleans' three-year experience in dealing with complaints of past sexual abuse.

The suits are based on plaintiffs' experiences between the ages of 4 and 14. In many cases they name staff members and recount specific beatings or episodes of rape or sexual molestation.

A few also allege abuse by adult strangers whose identities the plaintiffs hope to learn as the lawsuits' investigative process unfolds. Other complaints are more generalized, describing a climate of physical and psychological abuse in which nuns beat them severely and told them they were worthless, or that no one loved them.

In response, the archdiocese has been poring over old records to reach its own assessment of conditions at Madonna Manor during the 1960s, when the allegations are clustered, said the Rev. William Maestri, the archdiocese's spokesman.

"We want to make sure that where there are victims, we respond appropriately to them," he said. But church investigators have found that the children's records are not up to standards found today, he said. Some records are vague; there are gaps in others. "This is not an easy thing to do over this length of time," he said.

#### **Twin institutions**

Madonna Manor and an affiliated institution, Hope Haven, are operated by the Archdiocese of New Orleans' charitable arm, formerly called Associated Catholic Charities. At the time of the complaints Madonna Manor was staffed by nuns belonging to the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Both institutions are on Barataria Boulevard in Marrero.

Madonna Manor was founded in 1933 by a legendary West Bank priest, Monsignor Peter Wynhoven. It was opened to care for orphans or, more frequently, used as a refuge for children whose families were in turmoil. Many youngsters were placed there under court order. In other cases, families unable to care for all their children sent some to be cared for by the church.

Madonna Manor held younger children; Hope Haven across the street held older children and teenagers.

Throughout the 1960s, the period when the men allege their abuse occurred, the institutions enjoyed a full measure of public trust and affection. Secular and religious groups alike sponsored holiday parties and outings for the boys. The Navy invited them to tour visiting warships.

Within the past six weeks, however, four men, Larry Daigle of Kenner, James Harvey of Altadena, Calif.; Keith Porche of Slidell and a man identified only as John Doe of New Orleans, have gone public with claims they were frequently abused at Madonna Manor.

In addition, two other former residents, Stacey Brown of Harvey and Ted Lausche, of Lake Geneva, Wis., recently amplified suits they filed last spring that now allege specific acts of abuse at Madonna Manor by named priests, nuns or other staff members.

Most of the men have not approached the archdiocese on their own about their complaints, Maestri said. But several apparently have been in touch with the local chapter of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests.

Complaints about Madonna Manor "have been on our radar for more than a couple of years," SNAP spokesman Michael Kuczynski said. "The first thing that impressed us was the severity of the abuse reported. These aren't clichéd single instances of abuse against children, but repeated acts of abuse" by other students, priests, nuns and lay staff members, he said.

#### Denying allegations

Brown and Lausche allege they were raped by Monsignor Raymond Hebert, a priest who retired three years ago as pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish.

As one of the most respected senior priests in the archdiocese, Hebert headed the archdiocese's department of clergy. For years it was his duty to investigate complaints of sexual abuse against other priests and make recommendations to the archbishop.

"I certainly deny the charges completely," Hebert said. "I've never abused a child in my life. And I find it very disappointing that the institution itself finds itself under such severe criticism when it's long served as an outstanding child-care institution in this area."

Hebert directed Associated Catholic Charities in the 1960s and said he often visited the home in that capacity. But he said his interests were administrative and budgetary. "I didn't have relationships with the children, and I was never alone with a child," he said.

Maestri said the archdiocese believes Hebert may be the victim of a "misidentification." He noted that Brown said in his suit he "was heavily dosed with psychiatric drugs during most the years he lived at Madonna Manor."

Hebert's 53-year career as a priest is otherwise without blemish, Maestri said. Church investigators believe it strains credulity that Hebert could have surreptitiously raped Brown more than 20 times, as the suit claims.

Among the plaintiffs, Lausche is the only one to have approached the archdiocese before filing suit. But the church's internal review process months ago concluded that Lausche's claim against Hebert was "without semblance of truth," Maestri said. A second inquiry will look at Brown's allegations, he said.

Law enforcement authorities have been notified about Lausche and Brown's allegations and will be told about the other four, Maestri said.

#### Seven nuns named

The lawsuits allege a wide spectrum of physical, sexual and psychological abuse at the home.

Four of the six plaintiffs claim they were raped or sexually fondled by priests or men they thought were priests; three allege they were sometimes molested by nuns in dormitories at night; five allege they were sexually molested by Madonna Manor's civilian staff or other adults, sometimes off campus.

Several of the plaintiffs focus their complaints on the same staff members.

Among the nuns, the defendants are Sister Martin Marie, Sister Alvin Marie, Sister Gertrude Marie, Sister Mary Omer, Sister Stephen Rose, Sister Laurdette and a nun identified only as Sister Ladet.

Maestri said an investigation by the nuns' order indicated that two are dead; two are aged and mentally incompetent and one left the order and her whereabouts are unknown. The order has no record of another defendant's name. Maestri declined to assign names to those categories.

The men also allege that civilian staff members abused them. Those defendants are Ralph Rutledge, a band leader and bus driver, and Charlie Earhart, sometimes spelled Earhardt, a bus driver and owner of a nearby camp where he allegedly molested them on outings, four of the men said.

**Roger Stetter**, the New Orleans lawyer who filed the lawsuits, said he believes Earhart died some years ago.

In addition, Lausche names several other defendants, including Brother Dave Brueschere and Brother Patrick Click. No other information about them is given. Lausche also says he was raped by then-priest Gilbert Gauthé, a visitor to Madonna Manor whose exposure as a serial pedophile in later years was the precursor to the national sexual abuse scandal that rocked the church in 2002.

And all allege they lived in an atmosphere of harsh beatings by nuns, including one who, several said, favored a collapsible military shovel as a regular instrument. Two men claimed they were locked in a closet for up to three days as punishment.

"I just remember hate. Just hateful individuals," said Harvey, retired after a career as a military personnel manager. "As I relive this, I can't ever remember a pleasant moment."

Report reflects concerns

Some of the plaintiffs asked to see their files from those years and received reports with portions heavily blacked out, apparently to protect the privacy of other children, said **Stetter**, the lawyer who has filed the suits.

Brown, however, included in his lawsuit excerpts from a 41-year-old report from Cecile Stone, a social worker who visited him at Madonna Manor in the spring of 1964.

Brown quotes Stone as saying she found him covered with welts from a beating by Sister Laurdette. In a talk with the nun Stone said she "made it clear that it was embarrassing to me as a representative of ACC when I had to speak with parents whose children had been physically abused by one of the sisters on the staff at MM."

A month later, Stone again found "extensive bruises" on Brown's face. Sister Laurdette "admitted that 'she let Stacey have it,' and 'took Stacey into a room alone for several minutes and beat on him,'" Stone wrote.

"I told her that I was ashamed that any children entrusted to our care had been treated in this manner," Stone wrote in her notes, according to the suit.

## Dealing with the past

In each case the men say they are permanently damaged psychologically and they blocked out memories of the abuse. They say they only recently began to acknowledge and confront their childhood experiences.

Through years of drug abuse, job hopping and coping with his hair-trigger temper, "it was always there, but I never wanted to pay any attention to it. I was just trying to survive" psychologically, said Porche, 49, a Slidell resident who is among the plaintiffs.

But last year Porche was contacted by Lausche who for two years had been using the Internet and other means in Wisconsin to locate as many friends as possible from his days at Madonna Manor.

Lausche and Brown were the first to sue last spring. Media coverage of their cases prompted other plaintiffs to come forward, **Stetter** said.

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Bruce Nolan can be reached at [bnolan@timespicayune.com](mailto:bnolan@timespicayune.com) or (504) 826-3344.