

Church in the World

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United States

Cardinals accused of sex-case cover-up

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Alarming details emerged from a sordid abuse saga last week when a court document surfaced that seemed to validate allegations of secret codes used among cardinals to identify problematic priests. Fr Nicolas Aguilar stands accused of raping or molesting dozens of children in Mexico and Los Angeles over 20 years and faces criminal rape charges in the United States.

A lawsuit filed in the California Superior Court in Los Angeles on behalf of a former altar boy asserts that church officials, aware of Fr Aguilar's crimes, knowingly shuffled him from parish to parish without alerting the police. The officials - Cardinal Norberto Rivera of Mexico City and Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles - deny wrongdoing, but a written declaration by Cardinal Rivera suggests that they may have secretly communicated about the priest.

Cardinal Rivera said in a statement submitted for the case that he told Cardinal Mahony that Fr Aguilar had left Mexico for Los Angeles in 1987 for "family and health reasons".

"The phrase 'family and health reasons' was used within the Church to warn that a priest suffers from some sort of problem," Cardinal Rivera said in the court filing, which was dated 26 March but made public by McClatchy News Service last week.

"I anticipated that Cardinal Mahony would request a more detailed account of Fr Aguilar's history and problems if he decided to consider Fr Aguilar as an employee of the Los Angeles Archdiocese," Cardinal Rivera says. Cardinal Mahony denies receiving the letter.

Fr Aguilar had officially been forced out of the Mexican parish in which he was serving because of persistent rumours of homosexual behaviour, which is what Cardinal Rivera says he was referring to. The cardinal says he had no reason at the time to suspect Fr Aguilar of abusing minors.

Less than a year after Fr Aguilar's move to Los Angeles, where he worked at several different parishes, two altar boys there said that he had molested them. The archdiocese reported the crime to authorities, and police eventually found evidence for a string of other abuses there, but Aguilar absconded to Mexico the next day. He returned to ministry there and, over the next few years, allegedly abused at least five more boys. Authorities suspect Fr Aguilar is still hiding in Mexico.

In the Los Angeles lawsuit, the former altar boy, Joaquin Aguilar Mendez, says that Fr Aguilar raped him in a church in Mexico City in 1994, a horror he asserts he would have been spared if Cardinals Rivera and Mahony had not previously shielded the priest. Cardinal Rivera argues that the California court lacks jurisdiction to include him in the suit.

n The Los Angeles Archdiocese intends to sell its 12-storey, US\$40 million chancery building to fund clerical-abuse payouts, Cardinal Mahony said last week. The archdiocese agreed to pay US\$40 million in a December settlement of abuse cases but faces more than 500 other cases.