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Catholic group settles molestation suit

Litigation: Franciscan Friars to pay alleged victim \$1.7 million

August 2, 2000 12:00 AM

By CHUCK SCHULTZ

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Nearly two decades after he allegedly was sexually molested by a priest who ran the Santa Barbara Boys Choir, John L. Allen will receive \$1.7 million to drop his Superior Court lawsuit against Franciscan Friars of California.

The Catholic organization agreed to the settlement reached last week with Allen and his attorneys, David Nye and Stan Roden. Both sides agreed to keep details of the settlement confidential for one week.

Allen, 27, is a dental hygienist who lives in Northern California. Regarding the agreement that will soon make him a millionaire, he said Tuesday: "Nobody is ever going to feel real good about this."

As for the psychological trauma of being molested, he said, "No amount of compensation is enough.

Still, "I feel like they came to a decent agreement," Allen said.

His suit, filed in January 1999, alleged repeated molestations in 1982 and 1983, beginning when Allen was 9 years old, by Robert Van Handel. At the time, Van Handel was a priest at St. Anthony's Seminary on Garden Street and also ran the boys choir.

Allen allegedly was molested at St. Anthony's and during a camping trip with the singing group. In court documents, Van Handel denied the allegations. In a separate case, Van Handel and another St. Anthony's priest were convicted of child molestation in 1994. Van Handel was sentenced to eight years in state prison, but has since been released.

Although only Van Handel was accused of molesting Allen, a local board of inquiry determined in 1993 that 11 friars at St. Anthony's -- one-fourth of the priests assigned there -- had sexually abused at least 34 boys between 1964 and 1987, the year the seminary closed. Several victims reported their molestations to persons in authority at the seminary, yet no action was taken to prevent other boys from being molested, Allen's attorneys contend.

"We would like to have done more (through the lawsuit) to document and expose the ongoing pedophilia we believe exists in the Franciscan Friars and the Catholic Church," Nye said. "But our client is very pleased (with the settlement) and that is our number one concern."

Allen said he's glad the lawsuit was settled without him having to endure testifying in court.

"Nobody wants to be dragged through the courts and get their guts ripped out (emotionally)," he said. "Now I'll be able to get over it and get on with my life. I can use some of that money for counseling."

His settlement is by far the largest amount paid in any of more than one dozen lawsuits spawned by the St. Anthony's molestations, all of which have been settled out of court. Late last year, Allen and his attorneys offered to drop his suit for \$960,000, but Franciscan Friars rejected the offer, Nye said.

One of the main reasons the church organization finally agreed to settle was the prospect that names of other



AUG 13, 1994 FILE PHOTO-----Father Robert Van Handel is led out of court. Photo by STEVE MALONE/SBNP STEVE MALONE/SBNP

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alleged victims would become public if the lawsuit continued, said Father Michael Doherty, a Franciscan Friars spokesman in Los Angeles.

"Ultimately, the Franciscan Friars agreed to pay this very large sum of money to end this process and to serve as an expiation of our collective sin in the hope that this would bring the matter to closure, so that friars and the victims and their families could move forward in a spirit of renewal."

Doherty also noted that Franciscan Friars issued a public apology in 1993 for the molestations at St. Anthony's and promised to work to prevent such misconduct by priests in the future. Seven years later, the organization is still committed to dealing "firmly, but compassionately with friars who have offended to assure they do not offend again," Doherty said.

Allen sued soon after a state law, passed in 1998, extended until a victim's 26th birthday the time period in which such lawsuits can be filed. Allen had "repressed the memory of the molestations for many years," Nye said. While undergoing psychological counseling in 1998, though, Allen recalled being abused by Van Handel, the attorney said.

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When asked how much of the settlement money Allen will keep and how much will go for attorneys fees and court costs, Nye replied: "John will end up with over \$1 million in his pocket."

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As a condition of the settlement, Van Handel, the Santa Barbara Boys Choir and the Archdiocese of Los Angeles were dismissed from Allen's complaint.

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