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### A Vow to Victims Of 'Father Tony'

Margaret Schettler Pressured Church Officials to Reach Out to Those Abused  
[FINAL Edition]

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It's been 27 years, and Margaret Schettler cannot remember the boy's name. But she cannot forget his face. He had brown hair and brown eyes — bright, eager eyes. He always rode his bike to the parish rectory, and he always asked for Father Tony.

She tried to shoo him away. "Father Tony isn't here," she would say.

But the 10-year-old often stood his ground. "He promised to take me for ice cream," the boy would insist.

That was the summer of 1976, and Schettler had just graduated from Jesuit-run Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. She was 22 and in love with the Roman Catholic Church's ministry to the poor. She was thrilled to be working for room, board and pocket change at Our Lady of Soledad, a Latino parish in Coachella, Calif. -- until a priest let her in on the secret about Father Tony.

"I was told he was a temporary guest in the parish because he had been molesting little boys in the parish he came from," she says. "I was told he was to be kept away from kids, but I wasn't told how that was to happen or what, specifically, I was to do."

Because she agonizes over what she should have done then, Schettler is fiercely determined about what she is doing now: blowing the whistle on her superiors in the church for what she believes is their reluctance, even today, to retrace the movements of a notorious pedophile and reach out to his many victims.

Haunted by her memory of that boy on a bicycle, Schettler set out in mid-2002 to find Father Tony. She felt sure she would succeed, because in the intervening decades she not only had gained the confidence that comes from raising five children, but also had become a lay minister in the archdiocese of Los Angeles and a trusted church employee.

Yet for 18 months, she says, church officials responded with cursory inquiries and dismissive letters, with stalling, indifference or duplicity. Her plan had been to work discreetly, through channels. But her experience as a frustrated insider has led her to speak out in support of two controversial assertions made by sexual abuse survivors and their lawyers:

First, that only a small minority of the victims of predatory priests have revealed themselves to church or civil authorities, despite multimillion-dollar settlements with hundreds of plaintiffs in Boston and other cities.

And second, that the church has not fully kept its promise to encourage more victims to come forward.

Ultimately, Schettler learned the identity of the man she knew only as Father Tony. Edward Anthony Rodrigue is serving a 10-year sentence in a California state prison after admitting to police in 1997 that he had molested five or six young boys a year for most of his 29 years in the priesthood.

But of Rodrigue's approximately 150 victims, fewer than a dozen have come forward, despite a legal deadline. Victims of child sexual abuse in California had until Dec. 31 to file civil lawsuits under a one-time, one-year window in which the state legislature lifted the statute of limitations that bars claims dating back more than eight years.

"It's very embarrassing for these adult men to talk about it. Nobody wants to be the first to come forward, or among the few that have come forward," says Timothy C. Hale, a Santa Barbara lawyer representing four men who say they were among Rodrigue's victims.

As 2003 drew to a close, Schettler was racing the clock, trying to determine all the parishes in the dioceses of San Bernardino and San Diego where Rodrigue had served or visited. She pored over church records and urged pastors across Southern California to put notices about Rodrigue in their parish bulletins. Some helped. Many did not.

"It's 2003, and [church officials] are lying to you, withholding information, ignoring you. It's too many instances of not following up. I can't comprehend that it's purely incompetence," Schettler says. "I think that that's the bottom line — the church is trying to avoid lawsuits."

Catholic Church leaders in California deny that they are hindering victims from reporting, suing or seeking counseling. The charter on sex abuse adopted by U.S. bishops in 2002 calls outreach to victims the "first obligation" of the church, and California dioceses say they have taken that promise to heart by establishing hotlines and victims' coordinators, offering to pay for counseling and educating parents, teachers and children on how to identify abuse.

The diocese of San Bernardino, where Rodrigue spent most of his career, has been among the most active in the nation in this regard. Early last year, it produced a frank videotape about sex abuse that was shown at Masses in all of its 97 parishes. The diocese has repeatedly urged victims to seek assistance and has distributed

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forms for reporting abuse in English and Spanish.

"We think we've done a very aggressive job reaching out," says the Rev. Howard A. Lincoln, spokesman for the diocese.

But California dioceses are also worried by the deluge of lawsuits. In a last-minute rush, plaintiffs' attorneys in Los Angeles filed sex abuse suits at the rate of 10 to 15 a day in December, according to Ray Boucher, lead counsel in a court-supervised mediation process. By year's end, he estimates, between 750 and 800 suits against the church were filed in California.

Nationally, consultants working for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have just finished auditing the compliance of all U.S. dioceses with the church's new policies on sex abuse. Findings are scheduled to be made public Tuesday, but victims' groups are skeptical about the self-reported data, particularly on outreach to victims.

David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, says most of the nation's 195 Catholic dioceses have done the "bare minimum." Every diocesan bishop has called for victims to come forward, appointed someone to take complaints and created an advisory board to review cases. But none has provided the kind of information that is likely to persuade victims that their testimony is necessary and will be taken seriously, he says.

"They need to go to every parish where a known perpetrator served and say, 'If you were wounded by this man or might know someone who was, it's your Christian duty to reach out to that person, and it's your civic duty to call the police,'" Clohessy says.

"When the 7-Eleven is robbed," he continues, "the police don't go on TV and say, 'Somewhere out there is a bad guy.' They say, 'At this particular time, at this particular location, someone who looked like this committed a robbery.' That's what the church should do. It's sincere, direct and honest outreach, as opposed to generic public relations."

Schettler agrees. For her, the lightning-bolt moment came in spring 2002 when she was reading a newspaper at home in the Los Angeles suburb of Tarzana. She came across an article about a woman who claimed she had been abused by a visiting priest. Church officials were quoted as saying they had no idea who the priest might have been.

"You know that feeling where emotion rolls over you and you think, 'Oh, my God!'" she says. "I realized there could be kids who were molested at Our Lady of Soledad and they would be called a liar, because Father Tony never officially worked there."

On May 7, 2002, Schettler wrote a confidential letter to Bishop Gerald R. Barnes, head of the San Bernardino diocese. "I am not interested in being part of any public speculation or controversy," she began, and proceeded to explain her fears about a priest named Anthony, or possibly Sal, in Coachella in 1976.

A week later, the diocese's director of priest personnel, Monsignor Gerard M. Lopez, wrote back, promising to review personnel records. But she heard nothing more for eight months -- until she contacted the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department with the same information.

After fielding a call from a detective, Lopez sent Schettler an apologetic letter saying that his review of records had turned up nothing and that a former pastor in Coachella had no idea what visiting priest she was talking about.

That might have been the end of the story. Schettler believes the letter from Lopez was subtly, but firmly, dismissive. "I will maintain your reports on file . . . in the event that new information should surface," he wrote.

Undeterred, Schettler herself phoned the former pastor, the Rev. Francis Frankovich, who now lives in Texas. Based on her recollections, he identified the visiting priest as Tony Rodrigue.

Within days, Schettler found old newspaper stories detailing Rodrigue's history. He was first convicted of sex crimes in 1979 and got a year's probation. In 1991, he was laicized, or removed from the priesthood, because of additional accusations. And in 1998, at the age of 61, he was sentenced to 10 years in a plea bargain for molesting a developmentally disabled 11-year-old.

Though relieved that "Father Tony" was in prison, Schettler felt duped, because Rodrigue was among 20 sex offenders whose names had been given by the diocese to police a year earlier, in 2002. "It seems impossible that the head of priest personnel did not make the connection between my claims and this Father Anthony," she says.

At her prodding, the diocese confirmed through parish baptismal records that Rodrigue had crossed paths with her in Coachella for a few months in 1976, while he was waiting to be sent to a treatment center for pedophiles in Massachusetts.

But Schettler says Lopez told her he could not give her a list of other parishes where Rodrigue served. So she went to a university library and compiled the list herself from old Catholic directories.

In August, she complained to the church's national Office of Child and Youth Protection in Washington -- and was assured, she says, that the San Bernardino diocese had an excellent reputation for its handling of sex abuse cases.

Lincoln, the diocesan spokesman, says it "bent over backwards" for Schettler. Diocesan officials spent a total of four hours on the phone with her, sent her five letters and e-mails, and drove 160 miles to check baptismal records, he says. The diocese even offered her a meeting with the bishop, which she declined.

"Our diocese had no reason to think that she was not satisfied, and in fact, we think we made a very good faith effort for a very sincere lady," he says.

Last month, Schettler wrote to seven parishes across Southern California, alerting them that a convicted child molester had been in their midst. Some were caught by surprise.

"After I got her letter, I told the diocese, 'It would have helped if you had let me know this.' It kind of blindsided you," says the Rev. Bruce Cecil, who took over four years ago as pastor of Our Lady of Soledad in Coachella.

Cecil says he plans to publish a notice in the newsletter of his 4,000-family parish asking anyone who remembers Rodrigue to come forward, without explaining why. "You want to help the victims if there are some, but you also don't want to create a panic," he says.

Last weekend, Schettler experienced a partial victory when letters from the diocese were read at Masses in three parishes notifying them that Rodrigue had served their congregations and urging victims to come forward.

Schettler is still working 25 hours a week as a lay minister, planning special Masses and teaching adult confirmation classes at Our Lady of Grace Church in Encino. Her pastor, the Rev. Austin C. Doran, says he supports her 100 percent.

"She's simply inviting -- clearly and persistently inviting -- all of us in the church to do what we've said we'd do, which is to put the victims first, to act in the open instead of the dark, and to collaborate with law enforcement," he says. "I don't think you can argue with that."

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