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'We call them out for their failure to respond.' Diocese of Fresno sued under new abuse law

BY YESENIA AMARO

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Members of SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) hold press conference outside the Diocese of Fresno, demanding that the new bishop release a list of those accused of sexual misconduct.

BY **JOHN WALKER**

A child sexual abuse lawsuit was filed against the Catholic Diocese of Fresno on Thursday, accusing another one of its priests.

Father Anthony Moreno joined the growing [list of priests in the Diocese of Fresno who have been accused of sexual misconduct](#).

The lawsuit was filed under the state's new Child Victims Act, [also known as Assembly Bill 218](#), which lawmakers passed last year. St. Philip the Apostle in Bakersfield is also named as a defendant in the lawsuit.

The suit was filed by Jeff Anderson & Associates, which held a [press conference Thursday morning](#) to make the announcement.

The plaintiff, identified during a Thursday press conference as Toni Moreland, was allegedly sexually abused by Moreno around 1979-80 at St. Phillip the Apostle.

Moreland spoke during the press conference, saying she never imagined coming forward, but now hopes to encourage others to do the same.

"If I can do it, I hope that (other victims) know they can do it too," she said. "And secondly, I think that the church needs to be punished. I think what was the most troubling of all things, was to realize that they just moved Anthony to another parish."

Moreland said she thought her case was isolated.

"I thought that was just what happened to me, but when I learned that this is what the Catholic church does, I think it needs to be stopped," she said. "I think they need to stop victimizing innocent children. They just move these perpetrators, so they can victimize more children — they are not protecting the kids, they're protecting the guilty, and it needs to stop."

In a response late Thursday, the Diocese of Fresno said it "can verify two allegations were received in approximately 1979/80 against then Rev. Anthony Moreno."

"The same allegations were reported again to the diocese in 2008, at which time Mandated Reporting procedures were followed," Teresa Dominguez, chancellor for the Diocese of Fresno, said in a statement to media. "A third allegation was received in 2008 through a third party and was reported to law enforcement, as well. This victim was unavailable for interview. All other existing diocesan protocols at that time (2008) were followed."

Dominguez did not confirm whether one of those alleged victims was Moreland, saying the diocese doesn't release information about reporting victims and that's up to the discretion of the individuals involved.

According to Moreno's vitae, after serving in Bakersfield he was transferred to Sacred Heart in Fresno. He was placed on administrative leave on June 23, 1981. He stopped serving as priest on Feb. 9, 1995.

Work is still in progress regarding the diocese's investigation to release a list of priests who have been accused of sexual misconduct. Dominguez said that task has been "considered a high priority."

NEW LAW HELPS ALLEGED VICTIMS

Previously in California, survivors of sexual abuse had to file a lawsuit either by age 26 or, if already an adult, within three years of having realized their psychological injury or illness was caused by childhood abuse. [AB 218 increased the statute of limitation to age 40](#), and gives adult survivors who have recently discovered their abuse five years to sue.

Jeff Anderson said the new law allows "survivors," like Moreland, to come forward and take legal action against the alleged offenders, plus the organizations or institutions that "concealed" or "enabled" the abuse.

"This case targets the Diocese of Fresno, and why so, because it is the Diocese of Fresno whose practices, whose protocols, whose policies are so perilous that they make choices, conscious choices, time and time again, to protect the reputation of the diocese and the top officials in it ... at the peril of children across the entire diocese," he said.

Anderson also accused current Bishop Joseph V. Brennan and past bishops at the Diocese of Fresno of being complicit in alleged cover ups.

“Those practices are to stay silent, hide offenders and keep secrets,” he said. “One of the things they have not done in the Diocese of Fresno that both alarm us, and that they should have done, is to come clean and they haven’t.”

Anderson said there are “a lot of offenders” in the Diocese of Fresno who have landed on his law firm’s radar over the years.

“The diocese has yet to release a list of those offenders that they know have been reported to have sexually abused, Anthony Moreno is one, and others who they know are rapists, molesters and abusers of children,” he said.

For that reason, he said, [his law firm decided to release its own list of priests](#) accused of sexual misconduct in the Diocese of Fresno, “so that the community can be alerted to the peril -- both past and present.”

“We call them out for that failure, and we call them out for the practices that they have chosen to employ,” he said. “In this lawsuit, we call them out for their failure to respond to reports that they got regarding a priest in the Diocese of Fresno that abused Toni Moreland, and his name is Anthony Moreno.”

The diocese had sent a letter to Moreland to try to settle her case quietly, Anderson said.

The Diocese of Fresno serves an [estimated 1.2 million Catholics](#) across eight counties.



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Yesenia Amaro covers immigration and diverse communities for The Fresno Bee. She previously worked for the Phnom Penh Post in Cambodia and the Las Vegas Review-Journal in Nevada. She recently received the 2018 Journalistic Integrity award from the CACJ. In 2015, she won the Outstanding Journalist of the Year Award from the Nevada Press Association, and also received the Community Service Award.

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