

Headlines, Human Rights, Latin America & the Caribbean

RIGHTS-CHILE: Bishop Suspected of Sex Abuse Retires to Monastery

By IPS Correspondents

Gustavo González

SANTIAGO, Nov 1 2002 (IPS) - The child sex abuse scandals involving members of the Roman Catholic clergy in Chile have extended to the Church hierarchy, as bishop Francisco José Cox is now suspected of acts of paedophilia. He has announced that he will leave the pastoral life to spend the rest of his years in a monastery.

Cox, who gained public recognition in 1987 as head of the commission that organised the Chilean visit of Pope John Paul II, has lived in Colombia for the last two years. His pledge of reclusion was confirmed Thursday night by Santiago's archbishop, cardinal Francisco Javier Errázuriz.

Acknowledgement that a bishop has engaged in sexual abuse of children is unprecedented for the Chilean Catholic Church and comes just three weeks after a similar case involving a priest was revealed.

Currently under preventative arrest, José Andrés Aguirre is alleged to have sexually abused seven girls in his parish in a middle-class district of the capital.

Last May, after the scandal of the so-called paedophile priests had erupted in the United States, at least three cases emerged in Chile of clergy who were formally accused of the crime of sexually abusing children. One of the priests, Víctor Carrera, may be extradited from Italy to stand trial here.

Bishop Cox will likely ensconce himself in a monastery of the Schoenstatt order in Europe. He will dedicate himself to prayer, penitence and study, "to continue praising God and to seek forgiveness for his errors," said Errázuriz in an interview with Canal 13, the Catholic television station in Chile.

Errázuriz maintained that no denunciations against Cox have been verified, nor are there any judicial expedients related to the abuses Cox alleged committed against minors while he served as coadjutor bishop and later full bishop of the city of La Serena, 460 km north of Santiago. The Church hierarchy discretely removed him from that post in 1997.

However, Cox expressed "affection a bit exuberantly" among parishioners, particularly with children, admitted the Santiago archbishop. When his friends and superiors called his attention to what they perceived as a problem, Cox apologised and promised to change. "Unfortunately, he did not succeed," Errázuriz said.

Cox, now 68, served as bishop of La Serena beginning in 1990. The Congregation of Bishops, based at the Vatican in Rome, removed him from that post in 1997 in response to the growing number of rumours about his paedophilia tendencies and the fact that he was often seen driving around with children in his car.

The family of one of Cox's alleged victims reported the abuse to Antonio Puga, editor of El Día newspaper in La Serena. But Puga refused to publish a story about the matter because there was no concrete evidence of mistreatment of the minor.

The editor died, and did not leave any written or oral testimony of that episode. "He carried the secret to the grave and we are just learning about it now," a spokesman from El Día told the Santiago daily Las Últimas Noticias.

In its Friday edition, Las Últimas Noticias reported that other denunciations were received in 1997 "by a judicial authority who at the time had governmental duties," which gave rise to the beginning of a proceedings in La Serena courts, but the outcome of those cases is not known.

After his removal from La Serena bishopric, Cox performed internal functions for the Schoenstatt order of the Catholic Church, of which Errázuriz is also a member. Cox was later put in charge of communications in the preparations for the Church's Jubilee 2000 events.

In March 2001 he was sent to Colombia to conduct research on new secular ministries in Latin America, which he completed last month. On Oct 10 the bishop sent a letter to Errázuriz, informing him of his decision to retire to a monastery.

It remains unclear if it was a voluntary decision of the bishop or if it was imposed by his superiors within the Church, given that he allegedly has not overcome his "psychological health" problems, as the Schoenstatt order referred to it Friday.

Wednesday, two days before the Cox case came to light, it was revealed that a commission of the Chilean Catholic Church is preparing a report for the Plenary Assembly of bishops about the "zero tolerance" policy that the hierarchy is proposing to implement with regard to pederast priests, including punishment and preventative measures.

The Catholic Church thus forestalled new rumours about clergy sexually abusing minors, which had gathered force in early October with the arrest of priest Aguirre.

Known as "Father Tato", Aguirre – from 1998 to 2000 – engaged in "physical contact involving stroking" with seven girls who were serving as acolytes and altar assistants in his parish, located in the Santiago municipality of Quilicura.

Thursday, the National Children's Service of Valparaíso (120 km west of the capital) filed court charges against another priest, whose name has not been released, for the sexual abuse of three children at a shelter known as "Refuge of Christ".

Cox, ordained Jul 16, 1961, in Switzerland along with Errázuriz, was considered at the time one of the most promising priests of the Schoenstatt order.

Before entering the seminary, he studied economics, and as a priest he studied theology at the University of Freiburg (Germany), as well as philosophy and civil and canonical law at the Vatican university.

A paradoxical note to the history of the suspected paedophile priest is that he was the inspiration behind "Papelucho", the most popular character in Chilean children's literature, created in 1943 by his aunt, Esther Hunneus, when Cox was 10 years old.

Hunneus, whose pen name was Marcela Paz, published the first story of Papelucho's adventures in 1947. Eleven more books followed and are still a mainstay of children's reading in Chile.

The author died in 1985, at age 83. It is estimated that more than 12 million copies of the Papelucho books have been sold in this country of 15 million people.

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