

# **SNAP: Mexican, U.S. church leaders helped accused priest**

MEXICO CITY - Members of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests released documents they say prove that top Catholic officials in Mexico and the United States sought to help a Mexican priest accused of sexual abuse evade the law.

In response, a legal representative of the Mexico City Archdiocese and a spokesman for the Los Angeles Archdiocese denied the allegations and accused SNAP of trying to win its case in the media, rather than in the courts.

The documents, made public in Mexico City Sept. 11, include letters between Mexico City Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera and Los Angeles Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, along with Mexican police reports involving Father Nicolas Aguilar Rivera, who has been accused of abusing minors in both countries. Also included were transcripts of Cardinal Rivera's declaration before the Superior Court of the State of California in Los Angeles Aug. 8.

Many of the files originally were turned over to the court by Cardinal Rivera as part of his defense against charges of negligence, intentional infliction of emotional distress, civil conspiracy and sexual battery.

Joaquin Aguilar, a former altar boy, filed those charges against Cardinal Rivera and Cardinal Mahony in September 2006. Joaquin Aguilar, who says he was raped by Father Aguilar in Mexico City in 1994, charged the priest with sexual battery.

Joaquin Aguilar and Father Aguilar are not related.

In an interview with Catholic News Service, Eric Barragan, SNAP's director for Mexico and Latin America, said the documents revealed "an institutional cover-up" in the Catholic Church.

"We have some strong examples here," he said. "In these documents, priests, bishops and cardinals are communicating with each other in a secret code used by the Catholic Church to say that a priest has problems of pedophilia."

Joaquin Aguilar and SNAP say that Cardinal Rivera knowingly helped Father Aguilar escape allegations of sexual abuse of minors in Mexico by sending him to Los Angeles in 1987. Father Aguilar had been accused of abusing minors in his home state of Puebla, but formal charges were never filed.

Cardinal Rivera's representatives said there was no proof of abuse at the time Father Aguilar was sent to Los Angeles and that Cardinal Mahony was warned of Father Aguilar's problems. They have also argued that the Los Angeles court has no jurisdiction over Cardinal Rivera.

In a letter to Cardinal Mahony dated Jan. 27, 1987, Cardinal Rivera, who was at the time bishop of Tehuacan, Mexico, wrote that due to "family and health reasons," Father Aguilar wished to relocate to Los Angeles for a year.

Cardinal Rivera's representatives have said that "family and health reasons" were code words used among the clergy to refer to sexual problems.

Nineteen felony counts of sexual abuse of minors were filed against Father Aguilar while he was in Los Angeles, but he fled the country and was never extradited by Mexican authorities.

After Los Angeles police opened a case against Father Aguilar in 1988, Cardinal Mahony wrote to Cardinal Rivera saying he was not familiar with any code words, and had he known the priest had sexual problems Father Aguilar would not have been accepted in the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

In another letter, dated March 23, 1987, Cardinal Rivera wrote to Cardinal Mahony that Father Aguilar's departure from Mexico was the result of "a very delicate physical aggression."

"It is suspected that behind the conflicts that caused this physical aggression there are homosexual problems," Cardinal Rivera wrote. "The accusations of homosexuality against the priest are various, but none have been proven. It has remained at the level of accusations and suspicions."

Cardinal Mahony has said he never received this letter and requested a copy several times. SNAP has called into question the document's authenticity.

Armando Martinez, head of Mexico's College of Catholic Lawyers and a representative of the Mexico City Archdiocese, said there was no proof that Cardinal Rivera had committed any crime and that SNAP and Joaquin Aguilar's aim was to "create a war in the media."

"It's evident that the (Los Angeles Superior Court) has no jurisdiction over Mexican citizens, and much less regarding supposed events that, if (they) happened, would have happened on Mexican territory," Martinez said in statements to CNS.

Tod Tamberg, director of media relations for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, told CNS by telephone Sept. 12: "There is absolutely no credible evidence whatsoever,

when looked at objectively, that implicates Cardinal Mahony in any cover-up. It's well known that SNAP makes outrageous statements because they know the press will print them, but we have said, and the record shows quite clearly, that Cardinal Mahony was completely unaware of any problems with this priest when he came to Los Angeles.

"When reports were made of misbehavior, he (Father Aguilar) was immediately removed from ministry. He said he was going to stay with family, and he fled the country instead. And the documents also show that Cardinal Mahony was angered by that and that he wrote to the then-bishop in Mexico, informing him of the charges and asking that he be sent back to face justice."