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'Brother Vic' Arrested in Abuse Cases

Longtime Catholic Educator in Mobile Accused of Sexual Abuse and Enticement

By Kristen Campbell and Steve Myers

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Brother Victor Bendillo, a former longtime teacher and academic adviser at Mobile's only Catholic high school, was arrested Thursday on two charges of second-degree sexual abuse and two charges of enticing a child for immoral purposes.

The charges, stemming from alleged incidents in the 1990s, were the first criminal counts filed in a 5-week-old investigation into alleged sexual abuse by clergy associated with the Catholic Archdiocese of Mobile.

Mobile County District Attorney John M. Tyson Jr. said Thursday, "This is only the first set of arrests."

Bendillo, clad in handcuffs and a dark suit, emerged from the back of an investigator's car around 12:15 p.m. at Mobile County Metro Jail, 450 St. Emanuel St.

The 74-year-old, who worked at McGill-Toolen High School from 1959 to 1998, did not respond to reporters' questions as he entered the docket room.

The arrest documents identified him by his given name, Nicholas Paul Bendillo. He was widely known in Mobile as Brother Victor Bendillo, "Brother Vic," who was affiliated with the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, a religious order of male teachers.

He has been living at a Sacred Heart residence in New Orleans in recent days after previously being at a residence in Baton Rouge, La.

Tyson said prosecutors believe "there are a number of other victims of Brother Vic who are out there in the community."

Tyson also said his office is pursuing criminal investigations into four other men who have been associated with the Mobile archdiocese as clergy: Eugene Smith, Arthur Schreng er, Barry Ryan and J. Alexander Sherlock.

The Very Rev. Michael L. Farmer, chancellor of the Archdiocese of Mobile, said the arrest "continues to show the tragedy of what he has done, more than anything."

Told of Tyson's estimate that his office had received accusations against Bendillo spanning three decades, Farmer said he wouldn't be surprised by that, considering how long Bendillo had been around.

As Bendillo entered the jail's side entrance Thursday, his attorney, Donald Briskman, went into the docket room to bail him out. Briskman said bond was set at \$15,000 -- \$5,000 for each felony charge and \$2,500 for each misdemeanor.

The warrants reflected allegations from two victims, with two separate charges each. The complaints included charges of second-degree sexual abuse, a misdemeanor, and enticing a child, a felony.

The complaints state that Bendillo between January and April 1991, and again between September of 1995 and June of 1997, did "unlawfully and feloniously, with lascivious intent, entice, allure, persuade or invite, or attempt to entice...a child under the age of 16 years, to enter a vehicle, room, house, office, or other place to-wit...for the purpose of proposing to such child the performance of an act of sexual intercourse, or an act which constitutes the offense of sodomy or for the purpose of proposing the fondling or feeling of the sexual or genital parts of such child, or for the purpose of committing an aggravated assault upon such child, or for the purpose of proposing that such child fondle or feel the sexual or genital parts of said Nicholas Paul Bendillo."

During those same time periods, the complaints state that the alleged victims were "subject to sexual contact" when they were "less than sixteen years old but more than twelve years old."

Thursday evening, Briskman said Tyson's office had faxed the charges to his office late in the afternoon. Briskman said he had not had "an opportunity to review the charges or the allegations with my client at this point in time."

Briskman said he expected to do that "in the immediate future."

Tyson said he expects Bendillo will be arraigned in Mobile County District Court within a matter of days. Once that occurs, Tyson said, the case would move forward in District Court or to a grand jury.

If convicted of a felony charge, Bendillo could be sentenced to anywhere from one to five years in prison, according to the Code of Alabama. If convicted of a misdemeanor charge, Bendillo could spend up to one year in the county jail.

Mobile's Archbishop Oscar H. Lipscomb could not be reached for comment Thursday.

On April 2, Lipscomb released a statement noting that he had received a "verbal complaint" of abuse against Bendillo July 20, 1998. "In concert with his religious superior, he was immediately removed from ministry," Lipscomb said. Since that time, Lipscomb said, he had received three additional complaints against Bendillo.

Sacred Heart brothers who work at McGill-Toolen are assigned there by their religious superior and remain affiliated with their religious order, but they serve at the school with Lipscomb's permission. If a bishop has a problem with someone, that person can be ordered out of the diocese, Farmer has said. Lipscomb said Bendillo's personnel file from McGill-Toolen was given to the district attorney on April 1.

An April 13 Mobile Register story detailed one former male student's account of molestation by Bendillo. The man said Bendillo sexually abused him under the guise of providing treatment for underdevelopment of his genitals.

On Thursday, Briskman said he arranged for Bendillo to be picked up by district attorney's investigators at his downtown office. Detective Troy Faulk of the Mobile Police Department brought Bendillo to the jail, Tyson said.

"He came over voluntarily and turned himself in," Briskman said.

Briskman also is representing Sherlock, a longtime Mobile priest who, like Bendillo, taught at McGill-Toolen. The attorney would not say who had hired him in each case, but Farmer said the men are advised "that they need to get their own civil lawyers, which they would need to foot the bill for."

Brother Ivy LeBlanc, Bendillo's New Orleans-based religious superior, has said Bendillo was sent for evaluation after the 1998 allegation, then spent five months in residency at a treatment center.

LeBlanc would not say what the treatment was for or where Bendillo received care, simply identifying it as "a very reputable treatment center." Since then, Bendillo has continued to receive care through the center's "after-care program" and has worked with a personal counselor and a spiritual director, LeBlanc said.

In recent years, Bendillo lived in Baton Rouge and volunteered at Our Lady of the Lake Hospital; LeBlanc said that the Brothers of the Sacred Heart did not assign Bendillo to serve at the hospital, but knew he distributed Communion there as a volunteer.

"We really didn't think that was a threat to young people," said LeBlanc, who said he did not believe hospital officials were informed about Bendillo's background.

The order moved Bendillo to New Orleans this month -- after Tyson's investigation became public knowledge -- so he could be under LeBlanc's supervision. LeBlanc was not available for comment Thursday.

In the Sherlock case, a judge earlier this week ordered that the district attorney's office keep confidential documents obtained from two of Sherlock's therapists, John W. Davis of Mobile and Dr. David D. Harwood of Montgomery.

Briskman had filed a motion to quash the order seeking that information, but Circuit Judge Rick Stout ruled that the issue was moot because the information had already been turned over.

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