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Portrait Emerges of Priest Who Sought Victims in Three Nations, Left Poor Venezuelan Parishes Divided

By Mark Stevenson
Associated Press
April 25, 2002

While Pope John Paul II proclaimed there's no place in the church "for those who would harm the young," priests along Venezuela's impoverished Caribbean coast are still trying to heal wounds caused by a charismatic and beloved prelate who stands accused of child molestation in three countries.

The Rev. Enrique Diaz Jimenez pleaded guilty to sex offenses in the United States. Yet he was allowed to minister to Venezuelan youth and allegedly molest at least 18 boys, and then moved on to his native Colombia - where he pleaded guilty to two offenses.

In Venezuela's steamy Vargas State, stricken by flooding that killed an estimated 15,000 people in 1999, the faithful are still coming to terms with their unquestioning trust in Diaz. Parishes are divided between his critics and those who still revere him.

The priests dealing with the aftermath say the church must do more to track, report and retire predator clerics like Diaz.

"How is it possible that the church doesn't have a database, some way to check people?" said Horacio Zuniga, the 33-year-old priest who took over the Vargas parish where the 18 boys have accused Diaz of molesting them. Most were 8 to 11 at the time.

"Any big corporation has those procedures, but we are bigger than any, and we haven't gotten there yet," said Zuniga.

The Colombian-born Diaz, 59, was convicted of sexually abusing three boys while a priest at St. Leo's Church and Our Lady of Sorrows Church in Queens, New York, in the mid-1980s.

He was deported after serving a light jail sentence, arrived in Venezuela in 1991 and continued serving as a priest. Finally discovered and suspended here but never prosecuted, he returned to his native Colombia in 1996 and was later charged with molesting two more boys. Again, he pleaded guilty.

While Monsignor Thomas V. Daily, Bishop of Brooklyn, sent a letter to his Venezuelan counterparts in 1991 saying that Diaz had been accused of abusing children, priests here said the warning wasn't specific or forceful enough to prevent him dodging a local scandal.

"He came here from the United States portraying himself as a victim, saying it was all a plot by the evangelists to smear him. The monsignor took pity on him, and put him in a parish here," said the Rev. Javier Porras, who served in the Vargas diocese at the time.

"I felt betrayed, blindsided," said Monsignor Francisco de Guruceaga, the former bishop who hired Diaz. "The information was not as clear as it might have been. If only the bishop there (in New York) had suspended him, as I did, it could have stopped him continuing with these crimes."

He said he did as much as he could under church law: he suspended him, and sent letters to Colombian prelates and Vatican representatives.

"The church has very clear policies," said de Guruceaga, now retired. "What is lacking, perhaps, is a clear channel of information."

Described by colleagues and parishioners as mystical, inspiring, dedicated and charismatic, Diaz apparently still denies the Venezuelan charges, church officials say. A man who answered the phone

at Diaz's home in Bogota refused to identify himself but said, "He can't make any comment or give you any information."

Guruceaga described how his trust in Diaz was finally shattered in 1996, when a Sunday school teacher in El Mamo said that children in a First Communion class run by Diaz told her he had molested them. Guruceaga interviewed the children, some weeping, and then suspended Diaz from the priesthood for 20 years.

But the church did not report him to Venezuelan police.

"We couldn't do anything. Under Venezuelan law, the victim has to file a criminal complaint," said the Rev. Porras. "The victims' mothers were afraid to, perhaps because of the popularity Diaz had in the community. I urged them to go to the police ... but they feared reprisals, or that the rest of the parish would turn on them."

Many residents still keep silent.

"I know of people here who lived through this. But they act now as if nothing has happened," said Zuniga, the Mamo priest.

"The boys were left traumatized. They don't have any trust left in anybody who is a priest," Porras said.

Even after moving back to Colombia, he continued to pay occasional visits to his old Venezuelan parishes, as recently as two years ago, according to parishioners. And to this day, many have difficulty believing what they are hearing about him.

As they walked by Diaz's former parish in Punto de Mulatos, just down the coast from Mamo, Marina Colmenari and her husband, Romulo Benette, reacted with disbelief when told of the priest's New York convictions.

"That's unbelievable. He was a magnificent person," said Colmenari, 42. "I used to take my son to him, and there was never any suggestion of any problem."

She and other parishioners said he told them the reason he was leaving them was a personal disagreement with Bishop de Guruceaga.

"When they transferred him, we took up a petition to request that he remain here," said Colmenari.

Benette said Diaz would show children's films and obtain sports equipment for a youth sports league. "He really did a lot for the kids. He fixed up the church. We've never had a priest like him before, or since."

Editor's Note: Associated Press Writer Susannah Nesmith in Bogota contributed to this report.