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Accused priest crosses Catholic diocese line

Ex-monsignor celebrated Mass after dismissal amid sexual allegations from children

By LAURA B. MARTINEZ
The Brownsville Herald

March 17, 2005 — Evidence of sexual misconduct committed by a former Rio Grande Valley priest was the grounds for his dismissal from the Brownsville diocese but did not prevent him from celebrating Mass in Matamoros just last month.

The Monsignor Ivan M. Rovira was discharged from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brownsville in 2002 by Bishop Raymundo J. Peña, after officials determined that the monsignor had been involved in sexual misconduct.

"We did discover evidence that these allegations were substantiated," the Rev. Heberto M. Diaz Jr. said Wednesday at a news conference organized by the diocese. "So then he was removed from ministry immediately."

Rovira's dismissal means he can no longer celebrate or conduct a Catholic Mass in any country.

On Feb 23, he was present among hundreds of other priests from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brownsville and the Diocese of Matamoros to celebrate Faustino Armendariz Jimenez's installation as bishop of Matamoros.

"He was vested as priest, celebrating Mass and that is where the problem was," Diaz said.

"The Diocese of Brownsville is profoundly sorry for the pain it has caused them (Rovira's accusers) and their families," Diaz said. "We will continue to do everything in our power to ensure this does not happen again."

Peña saw Rovira at the Feb. 23 event and notified Matamoros diocese officials that he could not celebrate Mass because he had been relieved of his faculties, according to Diaz who said the Brownsville diocese notified the Matamoros diocese of Rovira's dismissal but blames February's breach on miscommunication.

In a written statement to the media, Rovira apologized for celebrating in Bishop Armendariz's Mass.

"Wrapped up in the emotion of the arrival of a new bishop, I celebrated at his installation in Matamoros. Often we do things that may offend people, and for that I apologize," he wrote.

Armendariz was out of town and could not be reached for comment on Wednesday.

Guillermo Jasso Morales, Armendariz's secretary, denied that Rovira presided Mass when Armendariz was ordained bishop of Matamoros on Feb. 23. "He (Rovira) does

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not have the faculty to exercise Mass," Morales said. "I don't know where you heard that."

Rovira is accused in the sexual assault of two children. According to an article that appeared Wednesday in The Dallas Morning News. The accusers are boys ranging in age from 9 to their teens.

The reported incidents happened about 24 years ago while Rovira was working as a priest in either McAllen or Weslaco. The victims came forward and filed complaints with the diocese around 2002.

No formal charges were brought against Rovira because the statute of limitations on the alleged crimes had expired, Diaz said.

Hidalgo County District Attorney Rene Guerra said the statute of limitations on sexual assault cases that took place around 1978 was 10 years, meaning the latest criminal charges could be filed was in 1988. Guerra said he was not informed on this specific case.

The Dallas Morning News reported that the diocese has been paying for or providing counseling services for the accusers.

The Vatican is reviewing Rovira's case to determine whether he will be defrocked. Rovira also has the right to petition the Vatican to become a layperson. Rovira has been working as a teacher at a Matamoros university. Diaz said the position does not involve celebrating Mass or working with children.

A total of seven cases involving accusations against Rio Grande Valley priests have been sent to the Vatican since the diocese's inception in the 1960s, Diaz said.

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Brownsville Herald reporter J. Noel Espinoza contributed to this report.

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