

SUICIDE REVEALS A MAN THEY NEVER KNEW

By Bill Miller; Bill Broadway

January 10, 1997

His housemates and co-workers knew him as Ted, a quiet, easygoing man who was making a new life in the Washington area. It was only after the Rev. Theodore Llanos killed himself that they learned of his very troubled past.

Llanos, 50, whose body was found Dec. 30 in his Northwest Washington home, was a Roman Catholic priest who moved here from California in 1994 after six men alleged that he had sexually abused them as children. Prosecutors were considering filing criminal charges, and a civil suit was pending.

His case had generated much publicity in California, as well as a community debate about the church's responsibility for weeding out sex offenders. But his suicide, and its apparent cause, startled his new friends.

"The person everybody is describing to us is unknown to us," said Jane Graf, a co-worker at the Barnes & Noble bookstore in Georgetown, where Llanos helped customers find works on theology, philosophy and other subjects. She said that a few people knew he was a priest but that they had no idea about his checkered background. "We knew Ted Llanos. We did not know Father Theodore."

Llanos left a note saying he did not do what he had been accused of, according to a law enforcement source. In the note, he said life had become too painful and apologized to anyone he had hurt, expressing the hope that he was moving on to a better life.

The sexual abuse allegedly occurred between 1973 and 1990 at five parishes in the Long Beach and Los Angeles areas. In all, more than 20 men, many of them former altar boys, came forward with similar stories. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles put Llanos on leave in 1994, after the first alleged victim demanded action. Llanos came to Washington, apparently to enter a psychiatric treatment facility for priests in Maryland.

Last July, he moved into a house in the 4000 block of Argyle Terrace NW, a residential neighborhood populated by many families with young children. One of his housemates, Bill Largess, 41, whose parents own the house, said Llanos never mentioned his legal difficulties or revealed the fact that he was a priest.

"I cannot say I saw anything unusual in him," said Largess, an actor who met Llanos through a mutual friend. "It's a struggle to reconcile all this with what I knew of him. He seemed perfectly friendly and cordial."

It was Largess who discovered Llanos's body the afternoon of Dec. 30. The priest was dressed in black, lying on his bed, with a plastic bag fastened by a rubber band around his head. Authorities said he had taken cold

syrup and sleeping pills. He was wearing headphones that played easy-listening music. Investigators estimated that he had been dead less than 12 hours.

Some neighbors contend that the archdiocese should have alerted them of the sex allegations, particularly because small children live on the block. Mark E. Roseman, a lawyer in the civil suit against the priest, agreed, saying, "Somehow that neighborhood should have known this man was there."

Sexual abuse by priests is a persistent, expensive and embarrassing issue for the Catholic Church. During the 1980s and early 1990s, hundreds of legal claims were made against Catholic dioceses on behalf of alleged victims, prompting the pope to speak out against such abuse and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to appoint a committee to study it. The allegations against Llanos were made the same year that the Archdiocese of Los Angeles issued a nine-page policy on dealing with sexual abuse by priests and its "devastating consequences" for victims.

The Rev. Gregory Coiro, director of media relations for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, said that Llanos had been on "inactive leave" and that he had "no priestly assignment" or responsibility for checking in with diocesan officials. "Any priest living outside the diocese is on his own," he said.

Coiro declined to discuss the accusations against Llanos.

After leaving California, Llanos reportedly went to St. Luke Institute in Suitland, a general psychiatric facility for priests and nuns and one of the few places in North America that treats clergy who are sexually attracted to children. The Rev. Stephen Rossetti, St. Luke's president, said privacy laws barred him from confirming whether Llanos had been a patient.

Rossetti said St. Luke, which moved to Silver Spring in August, monitors clients who have been child molesters for three to five years after they leave the facility.

Llanos quit his job at the bookstore Dec. 28, saying he was moving back to Los Angeles. He had no court dates in the immediate future, but he did face a tangle of troubles.

Prosecutors filed 38 counts of child molestation against Llanos in November 1995, stemming from accusations made by five men, who were between the ages of 13 and 17 when the incidents allegedly occurred. But a judge dismissed the criminal case a few months later because the statute of limitations had expired.

Prosecutors appealed the judge's ruling and were awaiting a decision. Meanwhile, however, California legislators passed a law -- spurred by the Llanos case -- that removed the statute of limitations in child sex abuse cases. Prosecutors were to meet this month to discuss refiling the charges.

The civil case also was looming, filed by six former altar boys against Llanos and the archdiocese. The lawsuit contends that the archdiocese had been aware of Llanos's behavior since 1973 but failed to act.