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27-year-old letter clouds L.A. archdiocese's timeline of abuse

by Joshua J. McElwee



The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, Calif. (CNS file photo)

A recently uncovered letter from 27 years ago muddies the record of when officials with the LA archdiocese knew of alleged abuse by clergy there, say victims' advocates, and the LA county district attorney's office is seeking a copy in order to "review it and make a determination on what it means," a spokesperson said.

The letter, which several media outlets in the United Kingdom reported on over the weekend, indicates that the archdiocese was warned as early as 1985 that one of its priests had been accused of having an "unwholesome relationship" with a British male.

According to the advocates, that revelation complicates the timeline of when the Los Angeles archdiocese says it first became conscious of accused clergy in its midst. A widely cited 2004 report from the archdiocese, which states that "from 1986 forward" it became archdiocesan policy to "promptly interview" victims, does not mention the priest or the allegations against him from the year before.

Tod Tamberg, the director of media relations for the Los Angeles archdiocese, said in a statement that the archdiocese knew nothing of the allegations against Robinson until 1993.

A report Sunday in the *Sunday Mercury* of Birmingham, England, states that the 1985 letter, recently obtained by the paper but not released to the public, was sent from the then-vicar general of the Birmingham archdiocese, Msgr. Daniel Leonard, to the then-chancellor of the Los Angeles archdiocese, Msgr. John Rawden, concerning Fr. James Robinson, a British priest who fled to the United States that year after a report that he had abused a child years earlier.

Robinson, whose full name is Richard John James Robinson, was extradited to Britain in 2009 on charges of sexual abuse, accused of assaulting underage boys between 1959 and 1983. He was found guilty of 21 charges of sexual abuse by a British court in October 2010 and sentenced to 21 years in jail.

According to the *Sunday Mercury* report, the 1985 letter states that the "immediate reason" for Robinson's stay in the United States at the time was that he had recently met again "a man with whom he had an unwholesome relationship about thirteen years ago."

"We have no reason to believe that there has been any recurrence of this problem, but Father Robinson says that he would feel safer a long distance away and untraceable by this man," the letter continues, according to the *Sunday Mercury*.

Patrick Wall, a former Benedictine priest who works for a California law firm on behalf of abuse victims, told *NCR* that the 1985 letter could be a "bunker buster bomb into the heart of the criminal conspiracy in the archdiocese of Los Angeles."

"The letter to Monsignor Rawden blows open a window into the heart of the secret archives that to date has never been produced," Wall wrote in an email to *NCR*. "The letter demonstrates the basic elements of the crime of child endangerment and could give the local district attorney probable cause to look at Cardinal Roger Mahony's activities."

Mahony served as archbishop of Los Angeles, which covers Los Angeles, Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, from July 12, 1985, until March 1, 2011. Cardinal Timothy Manning was Mahony's immediate predecessor.

Jane Robison, a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles County district attorney's office, said attorneys in the county became aware of the letter Monday and are seeking a copy to review it.

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Until the office can review the letter, the district attorney cannot determine a course of action, Robison said.

Sue Cox, the head of European survivors advocacy group Survivors Voice Europe, said that while the letter refers to an "unwholesome relationship" Robinson had with a man, the relationship in question was with an underage boy, whom the former priest is accused of abusing repeatedly.

"The 'unwholesome relationship,' as it's euphemistically called, refers to that," Cox said. "That was a euphemistic term. ... We think this is Vatican-speak, really."

The victim, Cox said, told British police of the abuse in 1985. The victim, now an adult, has chosen to remain anonymous, said Cox, who lives in the Birmingham area, but she knows him personally and has discussed the matter with him.

Cox also said the man's testimony was central to Robinson's 2010 conviction.

Robinson lived in the Los Angeles area from 1985 until his extradition in 2009. He served as a parish priest in the archdiocese until he was laicized in 1993, after archdiocesan officials say they received a separate letter from the Birmingham archdiocese detailing other concerns about the priest. That letter has not been made public.

Robinson's extradition followed a confrontational visit by a BBC program to the former priest's home in 2003. BBC reporter Paul Kenyon and a person who claimed to be one of Robinson's victims visited a Los Angeles-area trailer park where Robinson lived and knocked on his door. The reaction was recorded for the program "Kenyon Confronts."

The archdiocese's spokesman said in a statement that the archdiocese knew nothing of the allegations against Robinson until 1993, when it received the other letter from the Birmingham diocese.

"We did not receive any claim that Robinson abused anyone before he came to Los Angeles, and we have received no claims that he abused anyone during his time at three parishes in our archdiocese," Tamberg said in the statement.

He continued:

In 1993, the archdiocese received a letter from the Catholic bishop in Birmingham alerting us that Robinson had been accused of sexual abuse of children, and that he was being recalled to England. Upon receipt of the letter, which indicated that a crime was being alleged, Robinson's priestly faculties were revoked, and he was sent home.

Fifteen years later, in 2008, we received an anonymous phone call saying that he [Robinson] was managing a trailer park in Southern California. We turned that information over to the police. Given the penchant of child molesters to manipulate and lie in order to cover up their actions, it could be that Robinson lied to his bishop about a great many things, including possibly, his supposed relationship with another man.

Robinson was removed from ministry "immediately upon [the 1993 letter's] receipt," Tamberg wrote in a separate email.

Tamberg wrote that Robinson was not included in the archdiocese's 2004 report, known as "The Report to the People of God," because the report only lists those accused of abuse "in the Los Angeles Archdiocese."

"There were and are no local complaints of abuse regarding Robinson, nor have any lawsuits been filed alleging misconduct by him since he left the Archdiocese nearly 20 years ago," he wrote.

Joelle Casteix, the Southern California director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, agreed with the assessment but said she wouldn't be surprised if there were victims who haven't come forward.

"We know that this guy is now serving a prison sentence for abusing kids before he came to LA," Casteix

said. "We know that the archdiocese was warned that he had problems and he needed to hide from his accusers. And we also know that there was bad enough information for the archdiocese to quietly laicize him."

"We can only assume that kids were hurt in Los Angeles. And the reason that kids were hurt in Los Angeles is because the archdiocese knew that James Robinson was a predator and they allowed him to be a priest without any reservation."

The 2004 report by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles covered allegations of abuse in the archdiocese from 1930-2003 and was released with an introductory note by Mahony. An addendum to the report was released in 2005.

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