

Dan Rather Reports

Episode Number: 622

Episode Title: All Is Not Forgiven

Description: An investigation of shocking new evidence in the Catholic priest sex abuse scandal in Los Angeles.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

GOOD EVENING FROM LOS ANGELES. WHEN THE PRIEST SEX ABUSE OF CHILDREN SCANDAL EXPLODED NEARLY 10 YEARS AGO, THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH PROMISED A NEW ERA OF NO TOLERANCE. PERHAPS NO ONE WAS PUBLICLY MORE CONTRITE THAN CARDINAL ROGER MAHONY WHO UNTIL RECENTLY WAS THE LEADER OF THE LOS ANGELES ARCHDIOCESE. BUT TONIGHT A DAN RATHER REPORTS INVESTIGATION REVEALS NEW EVIDENCE OF A DISTURBING GULF BETWEEN WORDS AND ACTIONS. AS IT TURNS OUT, WHILE CARDINAL MAHONY WAS PROMISING SWEEPING NEW REFORMS, HIS ARCHDIOCESE WELCOMED A PRIEST WITH A DARK AND NOT-SO-HIDDEN PAST TO THIS PARISH. AS A RESULT, MORE LIVES WERE RUINED.

JOHN VG DOE, ABUSE VICTIM

This is not make-believe. You know, it's not something I made up. It's not something I woke up one morning and-- and-- and decided, "Okay, today I'm gonna say I got molested by a priest." This is something that took place. This is something that affected me as a child and it's gonna affect me for the rest of my life.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THIS YOUNG MAN IS LISTED AS JOHN V-G DOE IN A LAWSUIT AGAINST THE LOS ANGELES ARCHDIOCESE. HE ASKED TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS BECAUSE OF THE NATURE OF THE CRIME AGAINST HIM: AS A TEENAGE STUDENT AT ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE CATHOLIC SCHOOL, JUST OUTSIDE DOWNTOWN LA, HE WAS REPEATEDLY MOLESTED BY A POPULAR PRIEST NAMED FATHER FERNANDO LOPEZ-LOPEZ.

RATHER

Well, tell me how you first came to know Father Lopez.

JOHN VG DOE

I was going to St. Thomas the Apostle School. You know, I had-- and I had seen him around a few times, you know? And I met-- I actually got into contact with him in confession, during confession. That's when I met him.

RATHER

Did you like him?

JOHN VG DOE

Yeah, he seemed like a nice person at first.

RATHER

I know how difficult it is to talk about what most people would consider unspeakable things. But when did you begin to lose trust in him?

JOHN VG DOE

You know-- truthfully when we were driving around and he started-- touching me where he wasn't supposed to be touching me, you know? That's when I started-- I started kind of, like, wondering. You know?

RATHER

Did you resist? Did you protest?

JOHN VG DOE

I did at first. You know, I-- I pushed his hands away. I-- I-- but I never really questioned it. You know, I was raised to believe that I'm supposed to trust a priest. I'm supposed to listen; you know what I'm sayin'? This is the person I go to confession and tell all my sins to. So how can this person be doing something wrong?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WHAT'S NOTABLE ABOUT THIS CASE IS THAT THE LOS ANGELES ARCHDIOCESE ASSIGNED FATHER LOPEZ TO WORK WITH THE CHILDREN OF ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE IN 2001. THAT WAS A TIME WHEN THE WORLD -- AND THE VATICAN ITSELF -- WAS COMING TO GRIPS WITH THE UNIMAGINABLE SCALE OF DECADES OF SEX ABUSE BY CATHOLIC PRIESTS, AND COVER-UPS BY THEIR SUPERIORS... IN LOS ANGELES, THE CHURCH WAS, AT LEAST PRIVATELY, ACKNOWLEDGING IT HAD A PROBLEM. IN MARCH 2002, AN EXPLOSIVE SERIES OF ARTICLES IN THE LOS ANGELES TIMES DETAILED WIDESPREAD PRIEST ABUSE IN THE ARCHDIOCESE AND ULTIMATELY FORCED CARDINAL MAHONY TO ADDRESS HIS PARISHIONERS.

CARDINAL ROGER MAHONY, LOS ANGELES ARCHDIOCESE

We acknowledge our mistakes and our role in that suffering and we apologize and take responsibility for too often failing victims and our people in the past.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

CARDINAL MAHONY HAS SINCE BECOME A CENTRAL FIGURE IN THE SEX ABUSE SCANDAL. AS A BISHOP IN CENTRAL CALIFORNIA IN THE 1980s, HE HAD SHUFFLED KNOWN ABUSIVE PRIESTS FROM PARISH TO PARISH. AND UNDER HIS LEADERSHIP AS CARDINAL, THE LOS ANGELES ARCHDIOCESE AGREED TO PAY MORE THAN 500 VICTIMS A RECORD \$660 MILLION... IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT SOME OF THE VICTIMS HAD BEEN MOLESTED LONG BEFORE MAHONY'S TENURES AS CARDINAL AND BISHOP... WHEN

THE CARDINAL RETIRED IN FEBRUARY, HE AND HIS ARCHDIOCESE WERE THE SUBJECT OF AT LEAST TWO INVESTIGATIONS.

MAHONY

Lord, protect us in our struggle against evil...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

STILL WIDELY RESPECTED, INDEED REVERED BY MANY CATHOLICS AND MANY OTHERS FOR HIS GOOD WORKS OVER THE YEARS, MAHONY HAS NEVER BEEN CHARGED WITH ANY CRIME.

MAHONY

There's no wiggle room. I can't take a chance that someone --- may have been guilty or was guilty --- may abuse a child again, I can't take that chance.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT EVEN AS CARDINAL MAHONY WAS ASSURING THE PUBLIC THAT THE CHURCH NOW HAD A ZERO TOLERANCE APPROACH TO ABUSIVE PRIESTS, AT ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE PARISH, THOSE ASSURANCES DID NOTHING TO STOP FATHER LOPEZ FROM PREYING ON TEENAGE BOYS.

LOPEZ WAS EVENTUALLY ARRESTED AND IN 2005, CONVICTED OF MOLESTING JOHN VG DOE, NOW 22, AND TWO OTHER MINORS. THE PRIEST SERVED THREE YEARS IN PRISON, WAS EVENTUALLY STRIPPED OF HIS PRIESTHOOD, AND IN 2008, WAS DEPORTED TO HIS HOME COUNTRY OF COLOMBIA.

BUT OUR INVESTIGATION HAS UNCOVERED DISTURBING NEW EVIDENCE THAT LOPEZ SHOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN ENTRUSTED WITH CHILDREN IN LOS ANGELES.

VINCE FINALDI, ATTORNEY FOR PRIEST ABUSE VICTIM

Even if you're hiring a janitor to work in the school. You're going to find out where he worked... who he worked with. You're going to finger print the person. You're going to do a background check. They did very little checks on this person... this Father Lopez.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ATTORNEY VINCE FINALDI IS REPRESENTING JOHN VG DOE IN HIS LAWSUIT AGAINST THE ARCHDIOCESE, SET TO GO TO TRIAL IN OCTOBER. FINALDI'S CLIENT ALLEGES THAT LOS ANGELES CHURCH OFFICIALS, LED BY CARDINAL MAHONY, IGNORED OR DISREGARDED SEVERAL WARNING SIGNS ABOUT LOPEZ'S PAST.

RATHER

And why was Lopez placed here?

FINALDI

Well, the community here is actually primarily El Salvadorian, large El Salvadorian population, so being from Colombia he spoke the language, he knew the culture, and for that reason I believe they thought he was a good fit for this area.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE COMPLAINT ALLEGES THAT LOPEZ HAD A HISTORY OF ABUSING BOYS IN HIS CARE BEFORE HE EVER CAME TO LOS ANGELES, AND WAS ABLE TO CONTINUE BECAUSE OF A QUOTE “CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE.” FINALDI SAYS THAT OTHER THAN KNOWING THAT FATHER LOPEZ WAS A PRIEST, THE ARCHDIOCESE DID NOT DO NEARLY ENOUGH TO CHECK HIS BACKGROUND.

FINALDI

He showed up unannounced with no letter from his bishop and he said “Hey, I want to be a priest here.” And that’s really not the way that it works.

RATHER

Well, wait a minute. Help me, help the viewers understand here. He shows up in this archdiocese, in effect, on the doorstep?

FINALDI

Yes.

RATHER

Saying, “I’m a priest.”

FINALDI

Yes.

RATHER

Does he have credentials he can show or...

FINALDI

Well, he had some I believe he had some paper work, you know? But how does the archdiocese know that the paper work is accurate? Our position is the only way to do that is either to send someone to where he was from and inquire as to his training. Or to receive his actual records, his seminary records, his personnel records. Or at the very least call someone on the phone and talk to them. They didn’t do any of these.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

THE STORY OF LOPEZ AND HIS ABUSE OF TEENAGE BOYS EXTENDS FAR BEYOND THIS HARDCRABBLE NEIGHBORHOOD. TO UNDERSTAND WHY THIS CASE IS SO EXPLOSIVE FOR THE LOS ANGELES ARCHDIOCESE, YOU HAVE TO TRAVEL HALFWAY AROUND THE GLOBE.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WELCOME TO TIVOLI, ITALY, JUST OUTSIDE OF ROME. THIS IS A CLOSEKNIT, WORKING CLASS COMMUNITY, WHERE THE BIGGEST EMPLOYER IS THE FAMED TRAVERTINE QUARRIES -- STONE DUG FROM HERE WAS USED TO BUILD THE COLONNADE AT ST. PETER'S SQUARE AT THE VATICAN.

I

T WAS KNOWN TO THE LOS ANGELES ARCHDIOCESE THAT TIVOLI WAS WHERE LOPEZ SPENT HIS FIRST YEARS AS A PRIEST... BUT CHURCH DOCUMENTS UNCOVERED BY FINALDI AND HIS LEGAL TEAM SUGGESTED THAT THERE HAD BEEN ALLEGATIONS OF HOMOSEXUAL INVOLVEMENT WITH YOUTH GROUP MEMBERS DURING HIS TIME HERE.

GPS VOICE

Please drive to highlighted route.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SO FINALDI RECENTLY CAME TO ITALY TO GET SOME ANSWERS.

FINALDI

Well what we do is drive to the village and kind of get a survey of that and then park and walk around and start talking to people. And that's basically the only way to do it is knocking on doors and canvassing the area.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

GETTING INFORMATION ABOUT SUCH A SENSITIVE TOPIC ISN'T EASY HERE.

FINALDI

You wanna go talk to the old ladies a little bit?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SO FINALDI BROUGHT HIS FATHER ENNIO, WHO WAS BORN IN ITALY, TO SERVE AS AN INTERPRETER AND HELP BREAK THE ICE.

FINALDI

Why don't you go talk to them a little bit?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE VILLAGES HERE ARE THE SAME AS THEY HAVE BEEN FOR DECADES: DEVOUT AND REVERENT TO THE INSTITUTION OF THE CHURCH AND WARY OF OUTSIDERS.

FINALDI

So she didn't hear about anything right?

ENNIO

What? No.

ALESSANDRA PUGLIESE, FIELD PRODUCER (TRANSLATED FROM ITALIAN)

Have you ever heard of Father Lopez? He's from Colombia.

WOMAN 1

No, no.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

EVEN NEAR THIS CHURCH WHERE LOPEZ SERVED FOR ABOUT TWO YEARS, IT WAS HARD TO FIND ANYONE WHO WOULD DISCUSS THE FORMER PRIEST ON CAMERA.

WOMAN 2 (TRANSLATED FROM ITALIAN)

I'm busy.

PUGLIESE (TRANSLATED FROM ITALIAN)

... a priest who was here named Father Fernando Lopez?

MAN 1 (TRANSLATED FROM ITALIAN)

No, I don't remember him.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND MANY IN THIS CHURCHGOING COMMUNITY IMPLAUSIBLY SAID THEY DIDN'T EVEN REMEMBER HIM.

PUGLIESE (TRANSLATED FROM ITALIAN)

... a priest named Father Lopez who was here in the church?

MAN 2

No.

PUGLIESE (TRANSLATED FROM ITALIAN)

You don't remember him?

MAN 2

No.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT AT THE TIME FATHER FERNANDO LOPEZ-LOPEZ WAS CELEBRATED AROUND THE AREA FOR HIS ABILITY TO CONNECT WITH SOME OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD'S MOST TROUBLED TEENAGERS. THIS IS AN ARTICLE FROM A LOCAL PAPER ABOUT A DISCO HE OPENED IN THE PARISH AS AN OUTREACH EFFORT.

FINALDI

He'd go to the streets and go to the bars. Go to the place where kids were hanging out -- the kids who either didn't have families, or kids who had broken families and these were the kids that were actually the most vulnerable ones of the area here. If you're going to pick any kids to prey upon it would be those kids, the ones that don't have a lot of close family connections. The ones that don't have anywhere else to go.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

FATHER LOPEZ'S DISCO WAS LOCATED HERE IN THE SIDE OF THE SANTA MARIA DEL POPOLO CHURCH. AND THIS IS WHERE ALLEGATIONS OF LOPEZ'S INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR CAUGHT THE ATTENTION OF LOCAL CHURCH OFFICIALS.

FINALDI

Some of the parishioners were saying that he was involved in illegal drug activities with the kids and also homosexual activity with the kids. And it was emanating out of the bar here. We also learned from one of the church officials that there were allegations of homosexual activity against Father Fernando dating all the way back to his time in the seminary in Rome.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THAT INFORMATION CAME TO FINALDI'S COLLEAGUE, PATRICK WALL -- HIMSELF A FORMER PRIEST -- WHO WAS IN TIVOLI JUST A FEW WEEKS BEFORE OUR VISIT. WALL SAYS HIS SOURCE WAS DON FABRIZIO FANTINI... FATHER LOPEZ'S FORMER SUPERVISOR. DON FABRIZIO IS NOW THE PASTOR OF THIS BEAUTIFUL CATHEDRAL IN TIVOLI.

FINALDI

The big revelation from Don Fabrizio was he stated that he actually had a conversation with the archdiocese of LA back in 2001 regarding Father Fernando Lopez-Lopez.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THAT'S RIGHT. FINALDI SAYS DON FABRIZIO WARNED LOS ANGELES CHURCH OFFICIALS OF THE ALLEGATIONS SURROUNDING LOPEZ BACK IN 2001.

FINALDI

He said he fielded a phone call from the archdiocese of Los Angeles where they asked questions about Fr. Lopez, specifically regarding his experience here in Tivoli. And he stated that he did tell him -- he did tell the archdiocese that Father Fernando Lopez-Lopez had been the subject of certain allegations of homosexual activity with the youth and drug activity with the youth.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IF TRUE, THIS MEANS THAT THE LOS ANGELES ARCHDIOCESE WOULD HAVE HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO KEEP FATHER LOPEZ FROM

TRANSFERRING THERE.

BUT FINALDI SAYS WHEN HIS COLLEAGUE, PATRICK WALL, TRIED TO GET DON FABRIZIO TO SIGN A DECLARATION THAT COULD BE ENTERED INTO COURT DOCUMENTS, THE PRIEST REFUSED.

FINALDI

He stated that he had to go and talk to the bishop really quickly to make sure he had full authority to talk about this. He stayed for about 45 minutes in another room and came back and said, he's not allowed to continue the conversation with us.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WE ASKED THE ARCHDIOCESE TO COMMENT ON THE ALLEGATION THAT DON FABRIZIO HAD REACHED OUT TO LOS ANGELES. THEIR LAWYER RESPONDED QUOTE: "YOU SHOULD BE CAREFUL ABOUT THE STATEMENT ATTRIBUTED TO DON FABRIZIO FANTINI... HE CONFIRMED TO US THAT HE NEVER COMMUNICATED TO ANYONE CONNECTED WITH THE ARCHDIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES ANY CONCERN AT ALL ABOUT FERNANDO LOPEZ-LOPEZ. HE ALSO CONFIRMED THAT HE NEVER TOLD THE PLAINTIFF'S REPRESENTATIVES ANYTHING TO THE CONTRARY."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AFTER TRYING TO TRACK DOWN DON FABRIZIO OURSELVES FOR SEVERAL DAYS, OUR REPORTERS FINALLY REACHED HIM BY TELEPHONE AND HE ALSO DENIED TO US BEING CONTACTED BY LOS ANGELES.

DON FABRIZIO FANTINI, PRIEST IN TIVOLI, ITALY (TRANSLATED FROM ITALIAN)

Look I can answer about things that concern myself; I cannot answer on things about others. I was never contacted by Los Angeles.

PUGLIESE (TRANSLATED FROM ITALIAN)

Mr. Pat Wall told us that you were of great help and that you had given him very helpful information.

FANTINI (TRANSLATED FROM ITALIAN)

I'd rather not answer. It's not my job at this time. Do you understand?

PUGLIESE (TRANSLATED FROM ITALIAN)

Okay.

MIKE HENNIGAN, ATTORNEY FOR ARCHDIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES

We would have loved to have known more about this priest before we got him -- before he got here. But we didn't.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WHEN WE RETURN... WE GO BACK TO LOS ANGELES WHERE THE ARCHDIOCESE RESPONDS.

ALL IS NOT FORGIVEN ACT 2:

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IF THERE WERE ANY RESERVATIONS ABOUT FATHER FERNANDO LOPEZLOPEZ BY HIS SUPERIORS IN ITALY, YOU WON'T FIND THEM IN THE OFFICIAL PAPER TRAIL. LETTERS FILED IN THE LAWSUIT SHOW TIVOLI'S THEN-BISHOP, PIETRO GARLATO, AND OTHERS ASSURING THE LOS ANGELES ARCHDIOCESE THAT LOPEZ HAD A CLEAN TRACK RECORD WITH CHILDREN... AND THAT'S IMPORTANT BECAUSE HE WAS ASSIGNED TO WORK CLOSELY WITH CHILDREN.

BUT SHORTLY BEFORE APPLYING FOR A POST IN LOS ANGELES, LOPEZ HAD SET OFF ALARM BELLS IN ANOTHER SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA DIOCESE. ACCORDING TO THIS LETTER WE OBTAINED, LOPEZ FIRST APPROACHED CHURCH OFFICIALS IN SAN BERNARDINO, CALIFORNIA ABOUT TRANSFERRING TO THE UNITED STATES. BUT THEY WERE SUSPICIOUS ABOUT WHY LOPEZ WOULD WANT TO LEAVE A COVETED POST IN ITALY.

FINALDI

Father Lopez-Lopez arrived in San Bernardino unannounced, and he told the number two person in charge of the diocese, who was the vicar for clergy, that he would like to work there. He came from Italy. And during the interview, Father Lopez admitted that he had had sexual misconduct allegations against him and he said they were all young adults over the age of 18. He said the allegation was also that he was involved with drug activity with the youth.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DURING THE INTERVIEW, FATHER LOPEZ DENIED THE ALLEGATIONS. BUT FOR SAN BERNARDINO, AWARE OF THE SWELLING PRIEST ABUSE SCANDAL, IT WAS ENOUGH TO DISQUALIFY LOPEZ.

WE WANTED TO ASK THE LOS ANGELES ARCHDIOCESE HOW LOPEZ WOUND UP IN CALIFORNIA. CHURCH OFFICIALS AGREED TO LET US TALK TO THEIR LAWYER, MIKE HENNIGAN. WHEN HE AND HIS TEAM ARRIVED, THEY TOLD US WE HAD 15 MINUTES FOR OUR QUESTIONS.

RATHER

So is it or is it not your position that the Archdiocese vetted him?

HENNIGAN

Absolutely they did. In-- in writing, we-- we have it-- a signed, sealed, and-- and-- with-- the official stamp on it from the Diocese of Tivoli that-- that there was absolutely no moral problems with this priest.

RATHER

Then explain to me the-- what I'll call the San Bernardino part of the case.

HENNIGAN

Well-- that's-- one of the strange sides of this story is-- Father Lopez arrived at this-- at San Bernardino a little less than a month before he came to us. When they went through the same process that we went through, the home bishop gave San Bernardino, like he did with us, a statement that there was no-- no problem with this priest. But in the letter to San Bernardino, there's another couple of sentences in that--letter and it said, "However, there have been rumors about this priest-- in terms of his drug abuse and homosexual involvement with young people, although not children." We didn't get that part of the letter.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THREE YEARS LATER, SAN BERNARDINO CHURCH OFFICIALS HEARD LOPEZ WAS WORKING HERE IN LOS ANGELES AND WROTE A LETTER CAUTIONING THE ARCHDIOCESE.

RATHER

But, again, true or untrue, you tell me, that the leaders in San Bernardino let the Archdiocese of Los Angeles know once they found out that Father Lopez was here and was engaged with children?

HENNIGAN

Three years later. Three years later.

RATHER

And you put emphasis on that because--

HENNIGAN

Because for three years, since we'd gotten the clean bill of health from-- from Bishop Garlatto in-- in Tivoli-- he had been working at St. Thomas-- here successfully. We'd had no complaints with him-- about him. He'd been a popular priest. And so when we got the same letter that San Bernardino got, they got to make a decision at the outset about whether they wanted to deal with these rumors or not. When we got it, we were dealing with a priest who'd been successful here so we began a further investigation.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ATTORNEY FINALDI WONDERS WHY THE ARCHDIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES PLACED LOPEZ WITH CHILDREN AFTER RECEIVING NOTHING MORE THAN WHAT AMOUNTED TO A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION FROM HIS FORMER SUPERVISOR IN ITALY.

FINALDI

The first thing any reasonable person would do is call up the place where the person worked before, whether it be any kind of employment position and just find out what the

person's past was. That's just background checks 101. So either they didn't do that and they were completely inept in their background check, or they did do it and they lied.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

EITHER WAY, FINALDI SAYS, IT'S CARDINAL MAHONY WHO BEARS RESPONSIBILITY FOR LOPEZ'S TRANSFER TO THE ARCHDIOCESE OF LA.

FINALDI

It's a hierarchical structure where there's one person in charge of the entire archdiocese and at that time period, it was Cardinal Mahony. He's the one person who makes all the decisions; he's the ultimate authority and decision maker.

RATHER

It's no secret that the church is having difficulty with this issue. A priest arrives on the doorstep. You write the bishop. And you-- you take that at face value?

HENNIGAN

Absolutely. Absolutely. And-- and-- and we would do that today. If there's-- if there's no reason to suspect, then-- this is a solemn process. When we-- when we get an affirmation from the bishop, he is saying-- and-- and this is the bishop that-- that ordained him. This is the bishop-- where he's been for years. He says, "I know nothing about this priest that would suggest that he was inappropriate for children, nothing at all." And so, of course, we would. We did and we would until we-- until we had reason to investigate.

RATHER

Wanna make sure I understand what you're saying. Today with the no tolerance policy in effect and it's been in effect for quite some time--

HENNIGAN

Yes, it has.

RATHER

-- that you wouldn't go to the police records? You wouldn't go to the criminal records?

HENNIGAN

In a situation like this, I don't think so. Until there's reason to suspect that-- as long as we've got an affirmation from somebody who we think knows him well-- would know anything about him from rumors to-- to actual-- criminal activity, absolutely.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND THIS FAITH IN THE BISHOP'S WORD -- AS THE ONLY FORM OF BACKGROUND CHECK -- SEEMS TO BE WHAT WENT WRONG IN THE LOPEZ CASE.

WE WANTED TO KNOW IF THERE WAS ANYTHING SUSPICIOUS ABOUT FATHER LOPEZ IN THE PUBLIC RECORD. SO OUR REPORTING TEAM

LOOKED INTO WHETHER HE HAD A FILE IN ROME'S CRIMINAL COURT... AND WE MADE A STARTLING DISCOVERY: ACCORDING TO A COURT OFFICIAL, COURT RECORDS ON FILE IN ITALY SHOW THAT LOPEZ WAS ARRESTED IN THIS MEDIEVAL TOWN OUTSIDE ROME... ABOUT A YEAR BEFORE HIS TRANSFER TO LOS ANGELES.

HIS CHARGE: REPEATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON A MINOR. LOPEZ PLEADED GUILTY TO AVOID JAIL TIME.

RATHER

Well Counselor-- I have a problem. And-- I want you to explain as-- as best you can, how it is-- that when we checked the criminal records, it was very clear that he-- he had pled guilty-- to doing things he shouldn't have done with children. Now, as a journalistic enterprise, if we can do that with one phone call why couldn't or why didn't the church do that?

HENNIGAN

Well, we-- we follow a process that's worked very successfully for a long period of time, which is to get a solemn affirmation from the per-- people who know him the best. And, of course, there's language issues and things like that. But when we got it, it was completely clean. So, we-- we thought it was not necessary to go any further than that.

RATHER

This-- this is what you got from the bishop in Italy.

HENNIGAN

In 2001, that's correct.

RATHER

But-- surely you see my point that-- most people would not consider that anything close to-- an investigation of a priest who, after all, and correct me if I'm wrong, had sort of showed up on the doorstep-- applying to be a priest in your Archdiocese.

HENNIGAN

You know our-- our position then and now is if there's reason to further investigate, we do. In this case, we didn't have a reason to further investigate because we got this absolutely pristine recommendation from his bishop. Of course looking back today, looking over events that we now know happened here-- we would've loved to have known a lot more than we knew about this priest before we got-- before we got him, but we didn't.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BY COMPARISON, MOST SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN THE UNITED STATES REQUIRE EMPLOYEES WITH EVEN LIMITED EXPOSURE TO CHILDREN TO UNDERGO BACKGROUND CHECKS. THE FACT THAT ONE PRIEST CAME TO LOS ANGELES, WITH ALLEGATIONS

OF SUSPICIOUS BEHAVIOR LEFT OUT OF HIS OFFICIAL RECORD, RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT WHETHER THE ARCHDIOCESE'S SYSTEM FOR VETTING PRIESTS IS TO SAY THE LEAST, STRINGENT ENOUGH.

RATHER

Are you following the same protocol today that you followed in 2002 when-- the father first arrived here?

HENNIGAN

I honestly don't know the answer to that question. I suspect so, but I don't know.

RATHER

Wanna go back to-- to the moment when it could have been prevented. You made the point before, what could've, should've, might've, but again, given the context of the times, does it strike you as strange or unusual that with so many cases of sexual child abuse among priests that somebody didn't make a simple phone call, didn't check the criminal record of this person, did-- didn't check out something other than taking the bishop's word for it?

HENNIGAN

In this context, I think not. I mean, r-- remember that we've got not only time zone issues, but we've also got language barriers. And so-- we find that it's better to deal across those kinds of boundaries in writing. And-- and we then take the writing and decide whether or not there's anything to follow up based on what we got. And as I said, we got a complete clean bill of health from Bishop Garlatto.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT THE VICTIM'S ATTORNEY, VINCE FINALDI, SAYS THE PRIEST ABUSE SCANDAL HAS SHOWN THAT BISHOPS CAN BE UNRELIABLE...AND DEPENDING ONLY ON THEIR WORD, AND A JOB INTERVIEW WITH A PRIEST, IS NOT NEARLY ENOUGH SCRUTINY.

FINALDI

When we talked to the archdiocese of Los Angeles about it, Monsignor Cox who's the number two person in charge, he admitted he had received the letter and he read it and he gave it to his assistant, who was Monsignor Gonzalez and said, look into this. Monsignor Gonzalez took the letter, put it on his desk and essentially did nothing for three months. The archdiocese knew they should not believe the word of a potential predator, they should always err on the side of protecting kids, and that's something they did not do.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ACCORDING TO CHURCH RECORDS, FATHER LOPEZ WAS NOT PUT ON ADMINISTRATIVE LEAVE UNTIL MORE THAN FOUR MONTHS AFTER THE ARCHDIOCESE BEGAN LOOKING INTO THE ALLEGATIONS IN TIVOLI. THE VICTIM SUING THE ARCHDIOCESE SAID LOPEZ CONTINUED ABUSING HIM DURING SOME OF THAT TIME.

RATHER

Well, how does the abuse affect your life now? Or does it affect it?

JOHN VG DOE

Yes. It affects my relationships, you know, my job. And I don't think I would ever be able to hold a normal relationship with anybody, you know. One moment I'm okay and then the next moment I'm thinking of my past and-- and I'm depressed and I wanna die. You know-- Last night-- I was thinkin' about doin' this interview, you know? And-- I was crying, you know. I was thinking about I haven't had any good luck in life. You know, life has dealt me some messed up cards, you know? And-- sometimes I think if I had a choice whether to be dead or to be alive, I'd be dead. You know, if I knew that I could go and-- my family wouldn't hurt or wouldn't struggle, then I'd be better off dead, you know?

RATHER

You must have tried, or did you, to get it out of your mind, to just seal it off.

JOHN VG DOE

Yes. Tried that for many years. And it worked for a period of time. But eventually it hits you.

RATHER

Well, I want to share with you some new information, information we dug up in our investigation. Our reporting team went to Italy-- where Father Lopez was originally made a priest. And they learned that Father Lopez had been arrested and he pleaded guilty to molesting a teenager there back in 2000 before he came to Los Angeles. Did you know that?

JOHN VG DOE

No, I did not.

RATHER

How do you feel about that?

JOHN VG DOE

It-- it makes me sick to my stomach. You know-- I mean, they should've put a stop to it there and then. You know, he should have never been-- able to still be a priest. You know? It isn't right. You know, and it-- it scares me to think that they wouldn't stop it, you know, that they would just move him to Los Angeles and try to cover it up. You know, it just makes me think of how many other victims there were.

RATHER

Well now that you know and I've told you, I'm gonna ask you again a question I asked you before. Based on this information, this new information to you, who do you think, other than Father Lopez, is responsible for your abuse?

JOHN VG DOE

The Archdiocese, you know? The Catholic religion, the-- the people in charge. You know? They should've put a stop to it. They should a corrected it. They shouldn't allowed it to keep happening.

RATHER

Can you imagine yourself going back to the church--reconciling with the church?

JOHN DOE

I-- I-- I don't find no need for it. You know, I have a relationship with God and that's all that matters, you know? I don't need to go and bow down to-- to another man. You know what I'm saying? My relationship with God, it's good enough. I don't think I'll ever go back to the church.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

THE ARCHDIOCESE'S LAWYER, MIKE HENNIGAN, FEELS STRONGLY THAT CARDINAL MAHONY HAS GOTTEN A BAD RAP...HE SAYS MAHONY IMPLEMENTED NEW PROTOCOLS THAT WILL REMOVE A PRIEST AS SOON AS ANY ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE SURFACE...AND IT'S IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT IT WAS MAHONY WHO ULTIMATELY SIGNED THE LETTER CALLING FOR LOPEZ TO BE STRIPPED OF HIS PRIESTHOOD. HENNIGAN SAYS MAHONY SHOULD ALSO BE REMEMBERED FOR HIS TIRELESS ADVOCACY FOR IMMIGRANTS AND THE POOR. AS FAR AS FERNANDO LOPEZ-LOPEZ IS CONCERNED HE IS NOW REPORTEDLY IN COLOMBIA--AND FINALDI SAYS THE EX-PRIEST CONTINUES TO SEND EMAILS TO SOME OF HIS FORMER PARISHIONERS IN ITALY.