

SINS OF THE

FATHER

A GIRL'S ABUSE BY HER PRIEST

Father Kirsch was trusted in his parish. But for Susan Sandoval, his legacy was pregnancy, venereal disease and years of mental anguish. Today she's found the courage to fight back.

By David Hechler

RIDING ALONG THE BUMPY DIRT roads of tiny Abiquiu, New Mexico (population 500), Susan Sandoval is pointing out the sights. She lives in Albuquerque now, 125 miles south, but grew up here. That squat building facing the dusty town square housed the elementary school Sandoval attended. The school and the nuns who ran it are long gone, but Sandoval recalls them with affection, her smile warm and easy. As the car pulls up in front of St. Thomas Apostle Church, just across the square, Sandoval's smile clouds over.

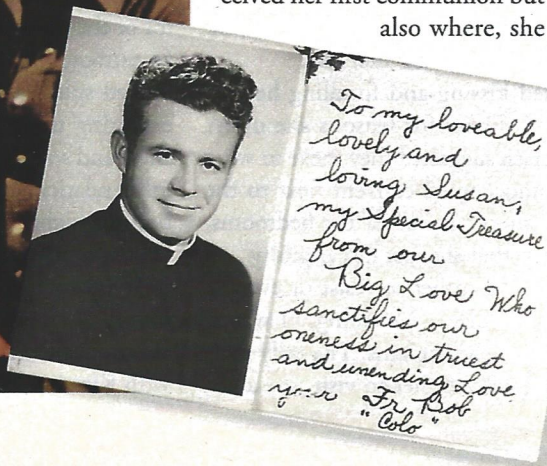
This is the place where she received her first communion but also where, she

says, a priest took her virginity. It was here, as she has charged in a lawsuit, that three years of sexual abuse began.

Sandoval strides through the wrought-iron gate and into the large adobe building. An amiable woman of 35 with curly brown hair and large hazel eyes, her face lights up when she turns to the choir loft. She and her friends used to sneak up there. Her smile lingers briefly, then fades. "If I were a good Catholic," she begins, her voice breaking, "I would say, 'I feel God's presence here.' But I do *not*." She struggles to regain her composure before she can finish her thought. "For me, God left this place a long time ago."

On first acquaintance Susan Sandoval seems quiet and deferential. But her seemingly placid exterior masks her determination and her unflinching honesty. It is this side of her that prompted Sandoval to go public with a story that for nearly two decades she had told to only one person—another priest she hoped would help her. *(continued)*

Kirsch with Sandoval in 1976, three years after the alleged abuse began. The note, inscribed on the portrait, is among the more than 100 love letters he gave or sent her.





Sandoval revisiting the church in Abiquiu, New Mexico, where she says she was first abused by Father Kirsch.

In the beginning: A priest's betrayal

The abuse began one October night when Sandoval was 15. She'd been working after school for Rev. Robert Kirsch since she was 12. Her tasks were clerical and the pay was low, but the job made the shy girl feel important. And she craved the attention of the 49-year-old priest, who helped her forget the alcoholism that limited her own father's availability.

Like many of the children in the parish, Sandoval was charmed by Kirsch and wowed by the exciting plane rides the priest with a passion for flying offered his favorites. He owned a Cessna 210, which he used mostly for church-related business. "When a child was so anointed," says Sandoval, "it was almost like Father Kirsch was some rock star and you were the lucky one selected."

Sandoval was working in the kitchen of the small rectory behind the church, waiting for Kirsch to return so he could drive her home, as he frequently did. But he was unusually late returning that evening. By 11:30 she was nodding off. Still, at that hour she could hardly walk the five miles home. And she couldn't call home because her family didn't have a phone. There was nothing to do but wait for Kirsch.

Too tired to sit any longer, she went to the bedroom and lay on the bed—fully clothed and on top of the covers. She must have fallen asleep, because she didn't hear Kirsch enter. She awoke to the sensation of a tongue in her mouth. It was Kirsch, and it was her first kiss.

He continued kissing and fondling her for several minutes. Then, for reasons she didn't understand, Kirsch suggested they move to what was then the unoccupied convent next to the church. It was there, in one of the bedrooms, Sandoval alleges, that she lost her virginity.

It never occurred to her to resist or even to question what the priest was doing. "I was as green as the grass," she explains. The only male her parents ever allowed her to visit, she adds,

laughing at the bitter irony, was the priest. Devout Catholics, they trusted Kirsch implicitly and taught their seven children to do the same.

Kirsch never ordered her not to tell, but he did say that what they were doing was "our little world." Without needing to hear the words, she understood secrecy was required. Far from this being a sin, he told her, it was God's will. "God is blessing this relationship," he assured her.

The tragic consequences

Her ordeal continued for more than three years. Kirsch kissed and fondled her incessantly, Sandoval says. She guesses they had intercourse between 50 and 100 times. Early on Sandoval was treated for a venereal disease she says she got from Kirsch. And when she was 18 years old—after three years of sex without using birth control—Sandoval discovered she was pregnant. Kirsch only learned about her pregnancy and subsequent abortion years later. "I tried to tell him," Sandoval says, but she points out that the priest dismissed or avoided her efforts to tell. Though a friend accompanied her to the doctor's office, Sandoval never revealed the identity of the father to anyone.

Deeply depressed by these events, Sandoval also began to find the relationship increasingly suffocating. Yet over time she had grown so dependent on "Father Bob," as he liked to be called, that she couldn't bring herself to break away.

The relationship Sandoval describes isn't unusual, according to Gary Schoener, executive director of a Minneapolis counseling center that has treated hundreds of clients who were abused as children by the clergy. It's typical, says Schoener, for abuse under these circumstances to continue for one to three years.

"The admiration for the minister or the pastor or the priest and the sense of being special is an extraordinary feeling," he says. "You may feel moved spiritually, and you feel you are safely exploring this uncharted territory of relationships and sex. What predictably happens is that other relationships become attenuated and you become highly dependent on the person."

It wasn't until she was 18, after she met and fell in love with her future husband, that Sandoval found the motivation and courage to end the abuse. Even then she still wanted to be friends with Kirsch, but she says he countered with an

"God is blessing us," Father Kirsch assured young Susan Sandoval.

ultimatum: no sex, no friendship. Coming from a man who'd promised he'd "always be there for me," she says the rejection utterly shattered her.

Pedophile priests: A growing crisis

Though no denomination can be sure it does not harbor pedophiles—adults sexually attracted to children—none has been shaken like the Roman Catholic Church. Many experts have suggested that the pressures of celibacy, combined with the isolation and loneliness so common in priests' lives, may be what drives some of them to forbidden relationships.

The Church itself has begun to recognize the severity of the problem. In June the National Conference of Catholic Bishops took a first step toward defining a national policy for dealing with priests who molest children by creating a committee of seven bishops to recommend action. And Pope John Paul II, in his first public statement on the subject, pledged to work with those bishops. "I fully share your sorrow . . ."

the Pope wrote, "especially your concern for the victims so seriously hurt by these misdeeds."

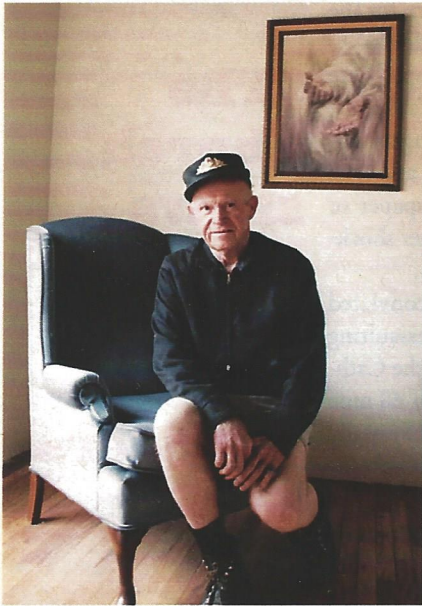
But mere words—even from the Pope—are not likely to satisfy victims. Sandoval's lawsuit against Kirsch—in which she is seeking an unspecified amount in damages—comes at a time when you can hardly pick up a newspaper or magazine without reading about another shocking case of a priest exploiting children.

- James Porter, a former priest and a convicted child molester, has been accused of assaulting children in three states. Late last year the Catholic church reached a settlement with 68 men and women whom Porter allegedly sexually abused in Massachusetts.

- Rev. David Holley, a retired Roman Catholic priest, pleaded guilty last March to molesting eight boys in New Mexico. He was sentenced to a minimum of 55 years in prison.

- Rev. Dino Cinel, formerly a priest in New Orleans, admitted to sexually abusing dozens of boys, among them seven he videotaped engaging in sex acts with himself. *(continued)*

“The Church shows a greater concern for offenders than for the abused.”



Kirsch, this year, at the church-owned retreat in Albuquerque where he lives with other retired priests.

● A parish priest in Owensboro, Kentucky, sued the Catholic church last June, charging that he was himself sexually abused by two priests when he was a child. "I'm sad because I turned to the Church for help and they did nothing," says Rev. Gary Hayes. "And if I can't get help, and I'm a priest, what chance does a young child have?"

The question resonates for Susan Sandoval. When she filed her lawsuit against Kirsch, the Catholic church and the Archdiocese of Santa Fe two years ago, it was the

first such case in New Mexico to receive wide public attention. Since then her lawyers have taken on 28 clients who say they were sexually abused by priests. And that's just in New Mexico.

A conspiracy of silence

New Orleans journalist (and Catholic) Jason Berry, the author of *Lead Us Not Into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children*, has documented 400 cases of priests or religious brothers who have been reported to Church or government authorities for molesting minors. Beyond the numbers, the Catholic church has been widely criticized for the way it has handled these cases. Often the Church has arranged for counseling and then reassigned priests to new parishes where they molest again. "Much of the magnitude of the problem today," charges Berry, "is tied to the long-standing institutional practice of recycling repeat offenders." According to Berry, the Church's "legal tactics have tried to muzzle or demean the people who have been hurt. On the whole the Church shows a far greater concern for the offenders than for those who have been abused."

Berry could have been speaking of Sandoval. Not only have she and her lawyers been criticized

David Hechler

by the Catholic church, Sandoval says that when she was 16 she told a Church official Kirsch was molesting her, and that he did nothing.

Rev. Arkad Biczak, in whom Sandoval confided, was at the time the youth director for the archdiocese. Father Biczak says he doesn't recall talking to Sandoval but acknowledges meeting with another woman whom Kirsch admitted he'd molested. Despite such knowledge, Biczak failed to report Kirsch's behavior to his superiors. "In the Church," explains Biczak, "if you get a reputation for being somebody who squeals on everybody, you ain't going to have any friends."

When Sandoval filed her lawsuit, various Church officials suggested she was fantasizing, angling for money or seeking revenge. "Which is hilarious," says Sandoval. "Why would it take me 17 years to become vengeful?"

For a time their tactics worked. A local newspaper covering the lawsuit withheld the priest's name for months. Recently, however, Sandoval believes public opinion has turned—largely in response to high-profile cases of sexual miscon-

duct among priests. Most dramatic was the resignation of Archbishop Robert Sanchez, head of the Santa Fe archdiocese, after three women said they'd had sexual relationships with him.

In Sandoval's case, opinions were undoubtedly swayed by the evidence. Much of it is in Kirsch's own words in the more than 100 love letters he sent Sandoval. One from 1974 begins with a page in Spanish followed by two in English. In an almost delicate hand, Kirsch writes: "I am continually amazed and humbled by the *patience* you *have with me* and my emotional, physiological, psychological and, yes, spiritual needs. Indeed, Darling, I *truly* wish that I did *not* have these needs, and therefore, you would not have to be bothered, aggravated and irritated by me so often!" A page later, he writes: "I only wish I could learn to love you as *you* need to be loved! I am, indeed, a lousy lover!"

In the face of such evidence, the Catholic church began to backpedal. The retreat was hastened by Kirsch's acknowledgment, in a sworn deposition, that he and (continued on p. 166)

Kirsch wrote, "I wish I could love you as you need to be loved. I am, indeed, a lousy lover."

(continued from p. 119) Sandoval had engaged in sexual intercourse only once, when she was 19. But he implied that it was *she* who had seduced *him*.

The rocky road back

At a popular restaurant in Albuquerque, Susan Sandoval looks as though she's dressed for church. The only hint that she is *not* is the message on the button pinned to her trench coat: "Bless you, Father, for you have sinned."

Sandoval talks about why she's gone public. "I'm a private person," she begins. "But keeping silent will not keep children safe or prevent these horrible things from happening. Speaking out might." The people who know her best contend she has always fought for what she believes in, though her older sister adds that Sandoval wasn't prepared for the criticism—or the toll it's taken.

Ironically, it's been only two years since she first viewed herself as an abuse victim. Depressed about problems that were hurting her marriage, she saw a therapist who asked Sandoval to list the significant relationships in her life. "I remember almost verbatim what I told him. I said, 'When I was 15, I had a love affair with our parish priest.' And I kept right on going. It was like reading a menu," she says with a mixture of astonishment and amusement. The only person she'd ever told about the involvement before that was Biczak. She only told her husband and family shortly before she filed her lawsuit.

Therapy helped her put things in perspective. For nearly a decade she felt "basically unproductive," making little headway in school or at work. "I think I spent a lot of time running away from this issue—not knowing it, of course."

In 1983 she resolved to settle down. She married Lawrence Sandoval, now a 42-year-old labor-union representative; within five years they had two children. But over the years she experienced problems with intimacy and, not surprisingly, trust. In the ten years she's been married, many times she hasn't felt she could say no to sex with her husband—just as she couldn't say no to sex with Kirsch.

Most of all, she worries about how her past affects her ten-year-old son and five-year-old daughter. Her experience has made her overprotective, yet at the same time she feels powerless to shield them from pain. "We try to shelter them," she says, "yet they are affected in many ways." Now that Lawrence has stopped attending church—as Sandoval did years ago—one of her greatest fears is that her children will grow up deprived of faith. Another is that they will lose their stable home. One day her little boy blurted out, "Mommy, are you and Daddy thinking about getting a divorce?"

The couple wondered themselves as their anger escalated. Once when she felt Lawrence was treating her like a commodity, "I told him he was acting just like Kirsch," Sandoval confesses. "That just blew his mind. And I agree it was a terribly inappropriate thing to say to someone you love. Terribly stupid. One of the things I resent about this as far as Lawrence is concerned is that it's put a really good person through hell."

After much resistance, Lawrence finally agreed to couples counseling and then joined a group for partners of survivors (the archdiocese, he notes, is picking up the tab). But neither sounds confident their marriage will survive. "There are days when it takes everything I've got not to walk out the door and never look back," Sandoval says.

Increasingly, however, her days revolve around her cause. After years of floundering, Sandoval has been galvanized by activism. She's begun working as a paralegal and now wants to go to law school so that someday she can represent other abuse victims. In the meantime she has cofounded the Alliance for Justice, a support group open to those of both genders and all denominations who have been abused by clergy members. Her public statements denouncing clergy who abuse children have brought increasing recognition. Elinor Burkett, the author of *Gospel of Shame: Children, Sexual Abuse*

and *the Catholic Church*, calls her "a natural leader." As Sandoval's younger sister puts it, "Susan has opened people's eyes."

Sandoval agrees but adds: "We are doing the work Church officials should be doing. These guys should get in the trenches with us. On second thought," she says with a laugh, "maybe they should get in their own trenches."

A sense of humor, says Sandoval, is sometimes the only thing that keeps her sane. But she appears quite solemn when asked if she will ever forgive.

"I will never forgive the Church. I will tolerate them. I will work with them for the common good. But I will never, ever forgive them." They cost her years of misery, she says. They could have intervened on her behalf when she was 16 years old. Instead, her naiveté and faith were turned against her.

And she will never forgive Robert Kirsch, she adds, even though she has found a new solace in her fight for justice. "I am proud for one reason: Now I have myself back. Maybe not completely back, but when I was under his thumb, I had no sense of myself, no sense of my worth."

Susan Sandoval's case against Father Kirsch was to be tried next month. The Second Judicial District Court in New Mexico, however, ruled the statute of limitations had expired before she filed her suit. Although the judge dismissed the case because too much time had elapsed since the alleged abuse took place, the court's opinion supports Sandoval's story. On the strength of this, her lawyers plan to appeal.

Rev. Robert Kirsch refuses to discuss Sandoval or the lawsuit against him. Now 69 years old, he's on paid leave, residing in a comfortable church-owned retreat house on the outskirts of Albuquerque. His superiors also decline to comment. ■

*David Hechler is a freelance journalist and the author of *The Battle and the Backlash: The Child Sexual Abuse War*.*