
The Miami Herald

Found on Miami.com

Metro & State

PEDRO PAN REFUGEE FILES SEX-ABUSE SUIT

ROBERT L. STEINBACK, rsteinback@herald.com

552 words

15 July 2005

The Miami Herald

Final

3B

English

(c) Copyright 2005, The Miami Herald. All Rights Reserved.

A former Pedro Pan refugee from Cuba, now 54 years old, filed a lawsuit in Miami-Dade circuit court Thursday alleging he was sexually abused by priests, supervisors and older immigrant children during the five years he was in the care of the Catholic Archdiocese of Miami in the early 1960s.

Robert Rodriguez, who now lives in Puerto Rico, has accused the archdiocese not only of failing to protect him from being sexually, physically and emotionally abused, but also of conspiring to suppress complaints about the violations it knew was taking place.

Rodriguez's Miami attorney, **Ronald P. Weil**, said recent acknowledgments of sexual abuse and coverups involving the Catholic Church give plausibility to his client's recollections, suppressed memories Rodriguez only recently recovered.

"We know there was a dark side of the church experience, and Pedro Pan was not immune from that experience," Weil said.

Archdiocese officials had not seen the lawsuit Thursday and could not address specific allegations. In a written statement released Thursday, they promised to thoroughly investigate the matter.

"We pledge our cooperation with civil authorities, and offer pastoral concern and counseling to those suffering," the statement said. "The Archdiocese of Miami expresses deep sadness and concern for alleged victims of sexual abuse by any member of the church."

Rodriguez, then 11 years old, was one of more than 14,000 Cuban children who fled the island without their parents with the help of the Catholic Church as Fidel Castro worked to consolidate power after his 1959 coup.

Rodriguez alleges incidences of "inappropriate sexual contact" by older children and supervisors began at the first camp in Florida City where newly arrived children were brought. Victims who complained "were threatened by Archdiocesan agents in charge of the camps with deportation, return to Cuba and an uncertain fate," the suit states.

During two subsequent years in a Broward foster home, Rodriguez alleges he was physically threatened, but not sexually abused. Later, he spent six months in an Opa-locka camp, where he says he was subjected to sexual abuse by priests, supervisors and older children. He also claims the camp had a practice of taking the boys to downtown Miami on Saturdays and allowing them to roam free without supervision, where they were regularly set upon by sexual predators.

It was "like a bunch of fresh meat coming in for those people who were abusing kids," Rodriguez told Herald news partner WFOR-CBS4.

Rodriguez also alleges the archdiocese sent him to a Texas school for children with behavioral problems where he was given unspecified drugs. By the time he was reunited with his family at age 16, Rodriguez "came out a changed kid," Weil, Rodriguez' attorney, said.

Weil said his client remembers the identities of some of the people who abused him, as well as those of other children he believes were also victimized, but that he will only reveal them "under oath."

“There are many good people in the Catholic Church,” Weil said. But he noted that his client’s goal “is to set the record straight and make it historically accurate, that what happened to him should not go unaddressed, and that other victims will have the courage to come forward.”