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Northwest Jesuits settle Indian boarding school abuse claims

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SPOKANE, Wash. -- An order of Roman Catholic priests on Thursday announced a \$5 million settlement with 16 people who said they were sexually abused while attending a boarding school on the Colville Indian reservation.

The Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus, or Jesuit Order of priests, will pay \$4.8 million in cash to the abuse victims and raise another \$200,000 for a homeless shelter or homeless services in the Omak area, the Jesuits and lawyers for the victims said.

The Jesuits operated St. Mary's Mission and School near Omak for more than 60 years until turning the facility over to the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation in 1973. The school is now operated by the tribes as the Paschal Sherman Indian School.

The 15 women and one man claimed they were sexually abused while pupils by the Rev. John J. Morse, the school's superior from 1966-1973, and Brother James Gates, a Jesuit worker there from 1970-1973.

"I am profoundly sorry for the pain and suffering of these people, and for the violation of trust which they have felt," the Very Rev. John D. Whitney S.J., head of the Oregon Province, said in a news release. "It was at the invitation of the native communities that Jesuits first came to the Northwest, and we hold that as a sacred calling. We are deeply apologetic for the ways in which we have not fully realized the grace of this invitation."

Morse, 77, withdrew from public ministry as pastor of Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church in Moses Lake after the allegations surfaced last April. He now lives under supervision in a Jesuit residence in Spokane. He continues to deny abusing children.

Whitney said Morse can seek reinstatement to active ministry through an appeal to a review board of the Jesuit province that oversees priests in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Alaska and Montana. Gates lives in a Jesuit facility in Michigan, also under constant supervision, the Oregon Jesuits said.

John Allison, a Spokane lawyer who represented the claimants with attorneys Michael Pfau and Timothy Kosnoff of Seattle, said the settlement was reached after several days of mediation, and included talks involving Whitney and several of the claimants.

Allison said the claimants were elementary school pupils who are now in their 40s and 50s.

"We are very pleased that this settlement was reached without the long and grueling battle in the courts we've seen in too many other cases," Allison said in a joint release with Whitney.

Some of the claims became public during bankruptcy proceedings involving the Spokane Catholic Diocese in 2006, Allison said. The settlement announced Thursday is separate from the \$48 million settlement reached last year with about 150 people who were abused by clergy in the Spokane diocese.