

Catholic Church confronted with unique legal woe

by Sri Raman and Dianna Heitz

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The Catholic Church is no stranger to litigation, but the latest legal turmoil appears to be unlike anything the church has faced before.

Angel Llavona, a parishioner at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Crystal Lake, filed a defamation lawsuit against Rev. Luis Alfredo Rios, charging the priest harmed his reputation during a mass a year ago.

The issue began when Llavona left Rios a voicemail complaining about his sermon from the previous week. Rios allegedly responded by playing Llavona's voicemail during the following week's mass and asked his congregation, "What should we do, should we send him to hell or to another parish?"

The Rev. Michael Doyle of Assumption Church in Chicago stressed that the incident in Crystal Lake is not about the Catholic faith but about the law.

"It took place in church, but it was a negative interaction between two people," Doyle said.

Doyle also said he has never heard of a parishioner bringing a defamation suit against a priest. Similarly, the Archdiocese of Chicago has not encountered a defamation lawsuit between a priest and a congregant, a spokesman said.

St. Thomas the Apostle Church declined to comment.

The Rev. Robert Sprott, of St. Peter's Church in Chicago, also said he is unfamiliar with any such episodes. Sprott, who has been a priest for 27 years, said that he hasn't even heard of a parishioner being confrontational about a homily.

"Almost all the time, comments about homilies are complimentary," Sprott said. "I have not heard other priests talking about this sort of thing, I guess it's rare."

The Diocese of Rockford, which includes the Crystal Lake church, issued a statement saying: "Disharmony or disagreement between a priest and his parishioners is always unfortunate. We hope that a peaceful solution at St. Thomas the Apostle can be established outside the courts."