

SINS of the FATHERS

In 1985 the Catholic Church in America was rocked by its first high-profile child sex abuse case. Ray Mouton was the defence lawyer hired to clear the priest and keep the story quiet. Instead he uncovered an international scandal. Here he tells Eamonn O'Neill how the Vatican still doesn't want to know

AT THAT time in my professional career, someone once joked that my legal speciality was controversy," growls F. Ray Mouton in his deep New Orleans drawl. "I had been in a lot of high-profile cases, representing drug-smugglers as well as police chiefs, suing government officials and also major corporations on behalf of individuals."

A chain-smoking, French-coffee drinking former alcoholic from the Deep South, Mouton could have stepped straight from the pages of a John Grisham thriller. Hard-bitten but lion-hearted, he's the pro who's seen more than he wants but still has a few big fights left in him. His muscular build may be heavier than it was almost 17 summers ago and his hair a few more shades towards silver, but his eyes still burn with a passionate anger as he talks for the first time about how he defended the first Roman Catholic priest to stand trial for child abuse. An historic case, it would open the floodgates for the scandals that have since ravaged the Catholic Church from Boston to Ireland, Florida to Poland.

Priest to the small, rural, deeply religious

community of Henry, Louisiana, Fr Gilbert Gauthé was accused of molesting scores of children during his religious career. Cases of sexual abuse by clerics had surfaced before, but the Church had always managed to bury them. This time, however, the victims refused to be silenced. Sensing trouble, the Vatican called Mouton to lead their defence.

"I wasn't privy to the thought process that caused the diocese to call me in on this case. But I am certain none of the country-club types who normally advised bishops were willing to walk side by side with a man who was later called a 'menace' and a 'predator' in the headlines. I guess I was a good candidate because I had never hesitated to represent anyone who sought my services. Everyone has rights and I viewed my job as protecting and asserting those rights."

Still, defending Fr Gilbert Gauthé would test Mouton's belief in the justice system to the limit. In his role as parish priest, Gauthé had systematically abused boys in his care, knowing that the Church would protect him in ways great and small from the punishments of the outside, secular world. ▶