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## **Former Chatham priest pleads guilty to dozens of charges for abusing girls**

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CHATHAM, Ont. (CP) - A retired southwestern Ontario priest admitted in court Thursday that he sexually abused dozens of young girls between 1954 and 1985.

Charles Sylvestre, who pleaded guilty to 47 of 61 sex abuse charges, will be sentenced on Oct. 6.

In court statements, the victims detailed how Sylvestre used candy to lure young girls to sit on his lap while he fondled their breasts and genitalia.

All of the victims were between the ages of nine and 14 at the time of the assaults.

Defence lawyer Andrew Bradie said Sylvestre, 83, doesn't even remember some of his offences.

"We're going back, in some cases 50 years, and he acknowledges what happened," Bradie said Thursday. "He doesn't have specific memories of a lot of this."

The charges against Sylvestre included indecent assault, sexual assault, and sexual intercourse with a female under 14 years of age.

Carol Ann Mieras, one of several victims whose names are not under a publication ban, said Sylvestre's admission of guilt was a long time coming.

"I have tried for many, many years, on many different occasions, to highlight the abuse," Mieras said. "At least now it's out in the public and I hope that it will bring other people forward."

After the guilty plea was entered, the diocese of London issued an apology, expressing deep regret to the victims.

Ron Pickersgill, a spokesman for the diocese, said Bishop Ronald Fabbro apologizes for the failure of the church to protect the victims.

"Bishop Fabbro intends to speak in Chatham on Sunday at mass at St. Ursula's Catholic Church and at that time ... he will formally apologize," Pickersgill said.

But Mieras said she's still frustrated with organizations that did nothing when she approached them about the assault.

"My issue is less with him (Sylvestre) as an individual because he is just a sick man," Mieras said. "My issue is more with all of the people that protected him and allowed it to happen for decades."

The assaults occurred when Sylvestre was a priest with various parishes within the diocese of London - including Chatham, Pain Court, Sarnia, London and Windsor.

Pickersgill said Fabbro would "speak more regarding sexual abuse and the approach taken by the church" on Sunday in Chatham.

Mieras said she also wants addressed the issue of "other priests that are continuing to do it and have done it that have been protected."

A London woman filed a civil lawsuit against Sylvestre earlier this year.

The woman - whose name is banned from publication - claims she was abused while she was a student at Mount St. Joseph's Academy in London around 1958.

According to the woman's statement of claim, the alleged sexual assaults happened when she was 12 and Sylvestre was acting in his capacity as a school chaplain and priest, counselling her in **religion**, Catholic education and other matters.

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