

Diocese Settles Abuse Claims

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By JOHN CHRISTOFFERSEN

October 17, 2003 - BRIDGEPORT-Bridgeport Bishop William Lori apologized Thursday to sexual abuse victims and asked for forgiveness as he announced a \$21 million settlement with 40 people who said they were molested by priests.

Lori said the settlement was an effort by the Roman Catholic diocese to "do what is right, just and compassionate."

"Let me express my personal remorse and the remorse of the entire diocese for the harm that was caused in the lives of so many individuals," he said. "With all my heart I apologize and I ask for forgiveness."

The settlement involves 42 claims by 40 people who allege that 16 diocese priests abused them when they were children.

"This settlement represents vindication for all the survivors of clergy sex abuse and is an acknowledgment of their very personal ordeals," said Cindy Robinson, an attorney representing the victims.

The victims, many of whom came from devout families, suffered problems including depression, difficulties with relationships and even attempted suicides after their abuse, said Jason Tremont, another attorney for the victims.

"They're really a great bunch of people that went through a living hell," Tremont said.

The payout is believed to be the third-biggest settlement by a U.S. diocese since the scandal that has rocked the Roman Catholic Church broke in Boston in 2002. It will be funded through insurance and the sale of undeveloped surplus property, Lori said.

Tremont attributed the amount to several factors, including a strong case developed by his office, Lori's willingness to resolve the claims and the fact that the diocese had assets in the wealthy region.

The new settlement is the second in two years for the diocese, which covers some of the wealthiest towns in the country as well as Bridgeport, Connecticut's largest city. The diocese reached a settlement in 2001 involving five priests and 26 plaintiffs for an undisclosed sum.

All settlements before the latest one total \$16.7 million and involve 47 claims of sexual abuse of a minor, diocese officials said.

There are four additional claims of abuse still pending in the diocese, Lori said.

The latest settlement brings to more than 70 the number of victims of childhood sexual abuse in the diocese, according to Tremont & Sheldon, the firm representing the victims.

"I would like to thank God for finally bringing this journey to an end and my prayer now is that all of the survivors and their families find closure and peace of mind," Mario O. Jaiman, one of the victims, said in a statement.

Jaiman, a 38-year-old Bridgeport resident, said he was abused several times, starting at the age of 9.

"It causes you to assume guilt for an act you have no control over," Jaiman said. "Finally it just took therapy to bring a lot of things to light and learn to deal with them."

The diocese announced last year that it had begun a mediation process to try to resolve claims that were reported after the settlement was reached.

Most of the claims in the settlement fall under a new statute of limitations passed by the state legislature last year. That law extended the time limit for victims to file a claim from age 35 to 48.

Lori said all but one of the priests involved in the new settlement are inactive, and three are dead.

Thirty-six of the cases involved abuse in the 1960s and 1970s, he said.

Attorneys for the victims said the abuses continued into the early 1990s during the tenure of New York Cardinal Edward Egan when he was Bridgeport bishop.

"Tremont & Sheldon believes that the Diocese of Bridgeport, including Cardinal Egan, allowed known sex abusers to continue on as active priests, enabling these offenders to have contact with children," the law firm said in a statement announcing the settlement.

Joseph Zwilling, a spokesman for the archdiocese of New York, declined comment, referring questions back to Bridgeport.

Lori said he believed Egan handled the issue responsibly "and according to his very, very best judgment."

Five lawsuits had been filed against the diocese, church officials said last year. Egan was named as a defendant in three, but the alleged abuse occurred 15 to 20 years before his arrival in the diocese, church officials said.

The lawsuits alleged that the families of abuse victims were told by diocesan officials that the problem would "be taken care of." Instead, the offending priests were not disciplined

and were moved to other parishes, where they abused more children, the lawsuits claimed.

Lori, who replaced Egan, played a key role in developing a national policy responding to the sexual abuse crisis rocking the Catholic Church.

Of the priests named in the settlement, the Rev. Joseph Gorecki, the Rev. Richard Grady and the Rev. Alfred Bietighofer are dead.

Joseph DeShan and Martin Federici have been laicized, the diocese said.

The Revs. William Donovan, Raymond Pcolka, Charles Stubbs, Stanley Bonaszek, Walter Coleman, Sherman Gray, Albert McGoldrick, Robert Morrissey, Vincent Veich and Henry Albeke are all inactive.

The Rev. Martin Ryan was accused of misconduct with a 17-year-old woman 25 years ago and is not considered a threat to children, church officials said.

Albeke is the only priest whose name has not previously been made public in connection with the scandal, church officials said.

Tremont said all of the priests should be laicized to ensure they never return to the priesthood.

The complaint against Bietighofer, who killed himself last year, claims that he abused a boy at the rectory of the former St. Anthony of Padua Parish in Bridgeport from 1969 through the 1970s, when Bietighofer was pastor of the church.

Bietighofer also was accused of abusing altar boys at Blessed Sacrament Church in Bridgeport.

Another man claims in a lawsuit that Federici abused him on numerous occasions in 1967 in the rectory of St. Theresa's Parish in Trumbull. About a half-dozen people previously have accused Federici of abusing them.

Gorecki is accused in a third lawsuit of abusing a boy on numerous occasions between 1960 and 1964 at Sts. Cyril and Methodius Church in Bridgeport.

One man claimed Stubbs abused him multiple times from 1967 to 1969 at St. Ann's Church in Bridgeport and the former Notre Dame Girls High School in Bridgeport.

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