

Diocese wants court to reconsider release of secret abuse files

Judge's dissenting opinion cited in appeal

By Daniel Tepfer

Staff writer

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BRIDGEPORT – The Roman Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport on Friday asked the state Supreme Court to reconsider its decision to release thousands of documents believed to detail abuse by priests dating to the 1970s.

In its motion, the diocese cites a dissenting opinion by one of the high court justices in support of the appeal.

"There was a dissent from former Chief Justice William Sullivan, which identified the numerous controversial facts of the case that were not acknowledged in the decision by the majority of the justices," said Ralph Johnson, the diocese lawyer. He said the diocese wants the full 7-member court to reconsider the ruling.

The motion for reconsideration blocks release of the documents until the state's high court decides whether to hear the request.

"This is one more sign that nothing has changed: church officials are still protecting church officials," said David Clohessy, national director of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "I very strongly believe these files will prove that five or 10 current diocesan staff ignored or concealed child sex abuse and Catholics need to know that."

"This statement is outrageous and gratuitous. Once again, SNAP is misinformed," said Joseph McAleer, a diocesan spokesman. "We remind everyone that the documents in question were available to the victims and their attorneys and, in fact, many were published by Connecticut newspapers in 2002 and widely reported."

John Marshall Lee, an official of the local branch of Voice of the People, an organization of Catholics pushing for more involvement by laity in the church administration, said he was disappointed by the diocese's decision. He added he is disappointed by the money the diocese is spending to continue blocking the documents' release at the expense of local parishes.

Last month, a Supreme Court panel of five justices ruled, 4-1, to allow release of thousands of secret documents stored at Waterbury Superior Court. Some of the documents, reviewed by the Connecticut Post, detail accusations of abuse by priests and efforts by then-Bishop Edward Egan to hide the abuse. The documents were provided under seal by the diocese as part of lawsuits filed against it by dozens of people who claimed they were abused as children by diocesan priests. Those lawsuits were later settled after the diocese paid the victims more than \$30 million, but the documents remained sealed in the court files.

The Supreme Court ruled that files of two priests, who were not accused of abuse but whose records was included with those of other priests, remain sealed.

"The decision raises significant concerns and deserves review by the full court, as opposed to a divided panel," the diocese states in its motion. "The decision admits, moreover, that all of the issues involved are issues of first impression under Connecticut law and, on virtually every issue, other courts have reached different conclusions."

In its original appeal, the diocese claimed that Superior Court Judge Jon Alander, who initially ordered the files unsealed, had a conflict of interest because at the time he was chairman of a committee reviewing the issue of access to court records by the media.

The diocese also maintains the disclosure of the sealed documents is barred by the religion clauses of the First Amendment.