

Diocese must reveal facts about priestly sexual abuse

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Letter to the Editor

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Catholics in the Diocese of Bridgeport have every right to ask Bishop William E. Lori to account for the millions of dollars expended on his effort to keep under seal court records relating to priestly sexual abuse and the attendant cover-up by Bishops Walter W. Curtis and Edward M. Egan. In 2001, the diocese reached out-of-court financial settlements with the survivors, while also requiring them never to speak publicly about the horrors visited upon them when they were children. Since then, additional sums have been spent totaling at least \$37.7 million, though the full amount has never been revealed. More money will likely be paid out as other cases are settled.

Prior to the settlement in 2001, the court sealed the depositions of Bishops Curtis and Egan and other records pending a jury trial. As the cases were never presented to a jury, the need for sealing ceased. The New York Times, the Hartford Courant, the Boston Globe and the Washington Post sued to have those documents made public.

In 2002, Judge Robert McWeeny of the Waterbury Superior Court, declaring that the records were of great public interest and that "the judicial system should not be party to a cover-up," ordered the seal to be lifted. In 2003, the three-judge Appellate Court ruled in favor of the diocese on the technicality that the newspapers had not presented their argument in a timely fashion. The state Supreme Court, however, ruled in 2005 that the records should be open, and remanded the case to Waterbury Superior Court for disposition.

In 2006, Judge Jon Alander rejected the diocese's plea for continued secrecy. Challenging his impartiality because he served on a commission concerning public access to court documents, the diocese appealed to the state Supreme Court. By a decisive vote of four justices to one, the court rejected the diocese's arguments in May 2009.

In a last ditch effort to delay publication, the diocese now asks to have the matter heard by all seven justices of the state Supreme Court. It seems highly unlikely that any of the four justices who ruled against the diocese would change his or her mind and render a contrary decision. However that may be, the process is likely to take months. Should the decision go against the diocese once more, it will probably appeal to the United States Supreme Court.

The cost of this litigation extending over a period of eight years must be extraordinary. However, one looks in vain in the diocesan annual financial reports for any reference to money spent in this way. At the time of the initial financial settlements with the survivors, the diocese stated that the money was covered by insurance. There was no

suggestion, however, that the people in the pews paid the insurance premiums or that the premiums had risen because of sexual abuse.

Where does the money to pay lawyers' fees incurred in this effort to stonewall and delay the inevitable come from? Some of it is probably derived from taxes (the cathedraicum and the school subsidy) levied by the bishop on every parish offertory collection. That amount is approximately 15 percent. Parishioners also should ask how much of the Annual Bishop's Appeal is diverted to this purpose.

The diocese argues that the newspapers have no legitimate interest in publication of these documents. That ignores the right of the Catholic people to an accounting of the conduct of their leaders, who present themselves as shepherds, guiding and protecting the flock.

Priest predators sexually abused innocent children in our parishes and schools and in doing so committed the most heinous of crimes. Bishops, knowing what they had done, transferred them from parish to parish without warning either pastors or people. In so doing the bishops abetted criminals and criminal activity. The diocese's intent is to delay as long as possible the reckoning owed to the Catholic people.

It is time for Bishop Lori to abandon his strategy of delay, denial, deceit and dishonesty and to allow the full light of justice to shine on this sordid chapter in the history of the Diocese of Bridgeport.

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