

9-17-07 - Pittsburgh Diocese to Settle Abuse Cases

By RAMIT PLUSHNICK-MASTI, AP, The Morning Call

PITTSBURGH - The Roman Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh said Monday it has created a \$1.25 million fund to settle 32 lawsuits alleging abuse or injury by priests.

In a joint statement with an attorney for the plaintiffs, the diocese said it wanted to settle even though Pennsylvania's statute of limitations barred many victims from filing personal injury claims.

Plaintiff's attorney Alan H. Perer said he appreciated the gesture even though he didn't think the sum fairly compensated the victims for the abuse.

An independent arbitrator will determine how much each individual will receive, partly based on the type and length of abuse, Perer said. If evenly distributed, it would be about \$40,000 each before legal fees.

The victims feel the courts and laws of Pennsylvania did not offer them protection, Perer said at a news conference.

"They are nevertheless grateful and they do appreciate that the diocese voluntarily is going to try to do something for them," Perer said. "The amount of money that is being paid is not commensurate with the damage and the shattered lives and the loss of faith that I would say every one of these people feels."

The diocese also will offer a program of counseling and healing.

Bishop Paul J. Bradley, diocesan administrator, praised both sides for moving from an adversarial relationship toward "conciliation and agreement."

The lawsuits involved represented 32 individuals. Three other people chose not to participate in the deal, and their cases will be dismissed by the courts, Perer said.

Diocese spokesman Rev. Ronald Lengwin said the diocese has been dealing with sex abuse since the late 1980s, long before the church as a whole began combating the issue. Like churches nationwide, Pittsburgh's diocese has a zero-tolerance policy for abusers, he said.

Of the 18 priests accused in the settled lawsuit, Lengwin said nine are dead and the remaining have not been practicing for several years. At least eight of them are retired and live in diocese facilities where they spend most of their time in prayer, he added.

Sex abuse by Roman Catholic priests has cost the U.S. church at least \$2.3 billion since 1950, including several multimillion-dollar settlements reached since the most recent crisis erupted in 2002.

The largest settlement announced so far involved the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, which agreed to pay \$660 million to about 500 people in July, shortly before jury selection was scheduled to begin in the first of 15 trials involving 172 abuse claimants there.

Pittsburgh has one of the largest Catholic dioceses in the country, with more than 760,000 parishioners who make up nearly 40 percent of the population in a six-county area.