

Court Rules Secret Priest Sex Abuse Documents Unsealed

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The Hartford Courant

12:08 PM EDT, May 22, 2009

The state Supreme Court ruled Friday that documents contained in 23 lawsuits against pedophile priests from the Bridgeport Archdiocese should be unsealed and available to the public.

By a 4-1 vote the court dismissed the latest attempt by the archdiocese to keep hundreds of pages of depositions, internal church memos and other documents that detail how top church officials, including then-Bishop Edward Egan, protected abusive priests, shuttled them between archdioceses and failed to report potential criminal activity to the proper authorities. Egan was later appointed a Cardinal of the New York Archdiocese. He recently retired.

The court ruled all but 15 documents in the 23 separate files are public records. The court ruled the 15 documents in question, at least two of which are depositions, were not submitted as legal documents and will remain sealed.

This is the second time the case has come before the Supreme Court since 2002. Waterbury Superior Court Judge Robert F. McWeeny first granted four newspapers The Courant, Boston Globe, New York Times and Washington Post - the right to intervene in the closed cases and seek the documents.

The Bridgeport Roman Catholic Diocesan Corp. appealed that decision but lost as the court remanded the case back to Waterbury court where Judge Jon Alander ruled in 2006 ruled that the files should be public record.

Alander ruled that he didn't find compelling the argument by the diocese that the files should remain sealed out of concerns for ensuring a fair trial, should one become necessary. The diocese argued that this is a legitimate concern because two sex abuse lawsuits remain pending, in addition to the cases already settled, and future claims could be brought.

"The public's right of access to those documents is particularly strong in these cases due to the extraordinary public interest in knowing whether minors in Connecticut were sexually abused by priests employed by the Diocese and whether the Diocese was responsible for perpetuating that abuse," Alander wrote.

The archdiocese appealed Alander's ruling sending the case back to the state Supreme Court for the second time.

The church tried a different appeal to the Supreme Court this time arguing that since Alander had been named to a judicial panel ordered to review public access to court records in general that he should have recused himself from this case.

The abuse cases in question, which involved more than 23 victims, were settled in March 2001. The Courant obtained copies of some of the sealed documents about a year after the settlement, including depositions taken of Egan, who was bishop of the Bridgeport diocese from 1988 to 2000, and other diocesan officials.

Egan was in charge of the Bridgeport diocese when most of the lawsuits against priests under his control were filed and adjudicated.

Stories detailing how Egan and other officials in Bridgeport ignored accusations or protected abusive priests were published in The Courant in 2002. The stories were based on depositions from the lawsuits, documents from the personnel files of accused priests and other diocesan memorandums.

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