

Using the Victims Yet Again

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Published: January 7, 2007

For nearly five years, the Diocese of Bridgeport has been fighting to keep secret thousands of documents that detail how it handled 23 sex-abuse cases settled in 2001. Several newspapers, among them The Times, have gone to court repeatedly to argue that the documents involved should be public. Last month Judge Jon Alander of the Superior Court dismissed the diocese's latest attempt to keep the cases sealed. The diocese announced it would appeal Judge Alander's ruling on 19 different grounds.

In a democracy, any person or institution can appeal almost anything, so this case may not be resolved for years. But the diocese's sanctimonious statement in reply to Judge Alander's decision is so outrageous it should not go unanswered.

In that brief response, the diocese justified its campaign to keep the records closed on the basis of promoting the privacy and well-being of the *victims*. It also said, "reopening and exposing long-settled cases, extensively covered by the media, to renewed public scrutiny is not a productive way to achieve the healing and resolution that the community seeks."

Yet the lawyer for the victims has told the court, as early as 2002, that none of them — not one — objected to release of the more than 900 documents involved. That the diocese would dare to use the welfare of the victims to justify keeping secret the crimes of the clergy against them is downright Orwellian.

Church officials have also taken pains to point out that releasing the records could threaten the right to a fair trial of defendants in two of the cases in which there is pending litigation. But, as Judge Alander wrote, reasonable alternatives exist to adequately protect such rights short of keeping secret all 23 cases and more than 12,000 pages of information.

The Diocese of Bridgeport covers all of Fairfield County, where 51 percent of the population — more than 450,000 people — is Catholic. The diocese is spending enormous amounts of time and money to keep from its own the shameful details of how it sheltered child molesters. If there is any justice, the State Supreme Court should quickly dispense with this latest appeal. The diocese should not be allowed to lock out the public indefinitely. And common decency should have prevented the diocese from attempting to justify its actions in the name of caring for victims whom its clergy molested.