Diocese aims for full transparency, invites AG to view files

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Seeks to help protect children and victims of sex-abuse scandals

Following an inquiry from New Mexico Attorney General Hector Balderas Sept. 5 requesting documents and records, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Gallup invited Balderas and Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich to review files relevant to investigations into clergy sexual abuse.

In the wake of an August Pennsylvania grand jury report, the AG's office began to investigate all three Catholic dioceses in New Mexico — Gallup, Las Cruces and Santa Fe — for material related to priest-abuse allegations.

The August report showed that more than 300 priests in Pennsylvania sexually abused more than 1,000 children over 70 years, beginning in the 1940s.

The records Balderas requested from the Gallup diocese were sealed by the federal courts following the conclusion of the diocese's recent Chapter 11 bankruptcy process.

The diocese declared bankruptcy at the end of 2013, and a fund of $23 million was set up to compensate the victims of sexual abuse at the hands of clergy within the diocese.

The *Sun* conducted an Oct. 30 interview with three members of the Gallup diocese — Communications Director Suzanne Hammons, Deacon Randolph Copeland and Patrick Mason, partner at Mason & Isaacson, PA, a Gallup law firm.

Hammons said the issue of sexual abuse initially gained attention with the introduction of the Dallas Charter, a set of procedures established in 2002 by U.S. Roman Catholic bishops to combat clerical sex abuse.

Cathy McCarthy, archives manager for the Diocese of Gallup, said the diocese keeps a meticulous record of their files, many of which are stored in a vault beneath their new building at 503 Route 66 B.

The documents in the vault range from marriage tribunals to school records to records of members of the diocese. Some of the documents pertain to clerical sex abuse.

McCarthy discussed the process of manually sharing thousands of documents with the attorneys general. She said some of the documents stored in the vault date back to 1939 and risk incurring damage from photocopying and faxing.

Upward of 11,000 documents pertaining to the bankruptcy and lawsuit need to be copied in order to have them in digital format to share remotely with the attorneys general.

Hammons said the diocese aims to clean up and possibly digitize all of its historical records, but until that process is complete, and because of the amount and age of many of the documents, the Diocese hopes the attorneys general will come to Gallup to view them.

“We can’t give all the documents in the available time frame,” she said, referring to the volume of documents that would have to be shared in the span of one month.

Copeland supported Hammons’ claim — he said it could take up to two years to properly preserve the files.

“The documents have to be manually copied [because of their age],” he said.

Despite the challenge of copying the documents, the diocese stressed their desire for transparency and to protect the victims of abuse.

“The case is about the survivors of abuse,” Hammons said. “We’re encouraging *Sun* readers to write to us about this case.”

And according to Hammons, the AG investigation might even help specify areas in which the diocese could improve.

“As a church, we should be held to a higher standard,” she said.

Copeland said following due process and letting the proper authorities investigate the files is the best way to present an unbiased and informed record to the public.

“Anywhere there’s power, there’s potential for abuse,” he said.

Mason has represented the diocese for nearly a decade. He said his firm advised the diocese to work with the attorneys general through weekly communication and updates on the overall state of the case.

“The diocese can truly look after the victims,” he said. “We need to make sure the record is straight.”

Copeland said the Diocese of Gallup’s willingness to share its records has led other dioceses and groups to follow their lead.

“[We] all have ways we can improve,” he said. “The goal of protecting children has been broadened [because of a vested interest in it].”

Copeland said the more people know about the diocese’s dealings, the more likely victims will be protected.

When asked about the diocese's next move, Mason said they would request permission from the appropriate judges to overcome privacy restrictions to obtain information on abuse victims in order that the attorneys general could review the victims' cases.

Once those restrictions are cleared, the diocese can take action on the cases.

"We have to make sure confidentiality is protected," Mason said.

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