

L.A. archdiocese settles abuse cases for \$660 million: Mahony issues public apology

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After more than four years of delays, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles has reached a landmark \$660 million settlement with 508 alleged victims of sexual abuse, the largest such payment thus far in the Catholic clergy sex abuse scandals.

The settlement, approved by superior court judge Haley Fromholz on July 16, followed public apologies to victims by Cardinal Roger Mahony, who oversees the most populous archdiocese in the U.S.

“Your life, I wish it were like a VHS tape, [that] we could put the tape in . . . and delete those years of difficulty and misery,” Mahony told the victims.

But many of those present and their advocates blamed Mahony and his lawyers for keeping pertinent files and records from the courts—to the point that some victims regretted that they would never learn the full truth. The settlement was reached two days before the first of the abuse trials was scheduled to start.

As it was, all pending cases in the archdiocese were settled, with plaintiffs to receive on average about \$1.3 million each. “I would give back the money if I could have my childhood back,” Mary Ferrell, 59, told reporters.

The archdiocese has agreed to pay \$250 million, its insurers \$227 million and some religious orders \$60 million, said Mahony. Payment of \$123 million more will be negotiated by plaintiffs’ attorneys and other religious orders. An agreement was reached in December by the archdiocese to pay \$60 million to settle 45 other abuse claims made against its clergy.

All told, the settlements resolved about 570 total claims of abuse against 221 priests, brothers, lay teachers and other church employees spanning at least 70 years. To meet the church’s part of the \$774 million owed victims, Mahony said that

its officials will try to sell “buildings that do not impact the core ministry of the church,” but that no parish properties or parish schools would be sold to meet the indebtedness.

Collectively, the U.S. sex abuse scandal has cost the Catholic Church about \$2 billion since 1950. In major clergy abuse settlements nationally since 2002, the Boston archdiocese had the second-highest settlement figure, \$157 million, paid to 983 claimants.

Mary Grant, Western regional director for the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said the settlement can be a “healthy validation” of victims, but the church hierarchy should get no credit for it.

“Settlements in no way signify reform or change by church officials,” said Grant. “When bishops settle child sex abuse cases, it is almost always to spare themselves court appearances, tough questions and the risk of perjury charges.”

Mahony had insisted since 2004 that he had to keep a sacred trust with his priests, and that to accede to legal demands to disclose “the spiritual, pastoral and psychological counseling of the priests” would be wrong.

Nonetheless, in February of 2004, a national panel convened by the U.S. bishops to monitor diocesan steps to deal with the abuse crisis had sharply criticized Mahony’s resistance to turning over documents. Those delays “did little to enhance the reputation of the church in the U.S. for transparency and cooperation,” the Catholic lay panel said.