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Bridgeport Catholics call for an end of secrecy

Thomas C. Fox | Sep. 4, 2009 NCR Today

Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia Sept. 2 passed to the full court a request by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport to keep clergy sex abuse files sealed. The full court will decide the matter by Sept. 29.

The diocese had asked Scalia to stay the publication of more than 12,000 documents while the full court decides whether to take up the diocese's appeal of an earlier ruling by the Connecticut Supreme Court that the documents are public records.

The following is a statement by Voice of the Faithful Catholics in the Diocese of Bridgeport:

The Diocese of Bridgeport, still blithely spending the money of the Catholic faithful, has appealed to the United States Supreme Court. Presenting itself as a victim of injustice, the diocese alleges that its First Amendment rights have been violated by the order of the State Supreme Court to unseal court records relating to priestly sexual abuse and episcopal cover-up. The diocese further claims it has not been treated fairly by a succession of state courts that have heard the case. The diocese complains that all of this happened long ago and that the newspapers only want to rehash old news.

In the eight years that have elapsed since the sexual abuse cases were settled in 2001, the diocese has taken its case to court and lost consistently. It is difficult to believe that the diocesan right to due process of law has somehow been neglected. In the course of those years the diocese has spent countless thousands of dollars -- shall we say millions? -- contributed by the people that could better have been spent to alleviate the suffering of the poor and needy. The diocesan spokesman, Joseph McAleer, refused to state how much money the diocese has spent on this legal battle.

This is not about the First Amendment. This is not about the intrusion of the government or the media into the internal affairs of the Catholic Church. The First Amendment guarantees the separation of church and state. It does not guarantee the Catholic Church the right to conceal criminal behavior on the part of the clergy, the bishops and their subordinates. This is about secrecy. It is not about the priest predators whose names are known. It is about concealing from the public eye the conduct of bishops and their subordinates, who, when informed that some of their priests had committed crimes, chose to hide them rather than report them to the police. This is about bishops and their lieutenants who knowingly loosed the criminals on an unsuspecting public by transferring them from parish to parish without telling anyone. This is about the bishop who shredded documents concerning guilty priests because he did not want anyone to know about their crimes. This is about the diocesan official who described the pretext to be used to explain the transfer of a guilty priest.

This is about the arrogance of power. This is about Bishop Edward M. Egan, who airily disclaimed any responsibility for his priests by declaring that they were self-employed, independent contractors. Even he soon realized how foolish that was and sent a letter to all the faithful attempting to clarify his statement. This is about the black wall of silence. This is about bishops and priests closing ranks to prevent anyone from knowing their guilty secrets. This is about the right of the Catholic faithful to know that their priests and bishops are honest, moral and upright men, not criminals or abettors of criminals.

Above all, this is about little boys and girls whose innocence was ripped away by priests whom they were taught to trust. This is about bishops, who, on learning of these crimes, paid off the boys and girls, now grown to adulthood, under the obligation that they not tell anyone.

This is not about saving the reputation of the hierarchy. This is about the great sin committed in our midst. This is about the duty of the diocese to confess that sin publicly; to do public penance for that sin; to publicly ask forgiveness of the children whose defenseless bodies were violated; to publicly ask forgiveness of the Catholic community.

This is the time to stop wasting money on legal stonewalling. This is the time for the diocese to abandon forever its policy of secrecy and to exhibit the humility of Jesus Christ, the head of the Church.

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For Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport

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