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Vt. diocese selling HQ to pay abuse claims

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Mar. 8, 2010

The statewide Diocese of Burlington, Vt., is preparing to sell its headquarters building and a now-closed camp to help pay for claims and judgments stemming from clerical sexual abuse.

The diocese has been in the process of selecting a broker to judge the worth of the properties and market them to potential buyers, according to Father Dan White, communications director and associate chancellor of the diocese.

Liens had been placed on the two properties after a Colorado man, a former altar server in Burlington in the 1970s, won an $8.75 million judgment against the diocese after arguing he had been molested by a priest, Father Edward Paquette. The man recently reached an out-of-court settlement with the diocese while the diocese was appealing the judgment to the Vermont Supreme Court, allowing the sales to take place.

Father White, in a March 2 interview with Catholic News Service, said no one in the diocese knows the worth of the properties since they are tax-exempt entities and not on the tax rolls.

The diocesan headquarters building is a former Catholic orphanage which sits on a 30-acre site. It is about 70 percent empty, according to Father White.

"We have to be good stewards of the gifts God entrusted to us as a church. If we're in a building that is 70 percent unused, it's not hard to justify heading down this path," he said.

Camp Holy Cross, which has been closed for a few years, sits on a 26-acre site in Colchester, Vt., on Malletts Bay. Parents today want "specialized soccer camps, baseball camps," Father White said. "The camping on the waterfront -- canoeing, bonfires -- had really dwindled."

The Burlington Free Press daily newspaper said other diocesan properties may be put up for sale to satisfy abuse claims.

In February Judge Helen Toor, who presides over the Chittenden Superior Court, issued an order consolidating the cases of 18 plaintiffs, all of whom allege abuse in the 1970s by Father Paquette. Some of the cases have been open for five years. She added she was considering consolidating the cases of another three plaintiffs who charge that then-Father Alfred Willis abused them in the 1970s. Willis was laicized in 1985, following complaints that he molested boys in parishes where he was assigned.

The diocese was ordered to pay $2.2 million in October at the end of the latest civil trial on clerical sexual abuse. Toor denied a diocesan request to revise the judgment based on what it said were flaws in the jury's deliberations and claims of bias over two of the jurors.

The diocese is appealing to the state Supreme Court a 2008 verdict ordering it to pay $3.6 million. Two other abuse cases tried in the past three years ended in mistrials. The diocese is the sole defendant in all of the

Vermont cases.

Father White told CNS that the diocese was pursuing a couple of leads to relocate its offices. One possibility included converting unused space at a parish, he added. "That would certainly be an option, but that's up to the parish, and the parish would have to approach the diocese about that," Father White said. "There are different options on buying (property)."

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