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Oblates settle abuse suits, paying $24.8 million

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WILMINGTON, Del. -- The Oblates of St. Francis de Sales have settled all 39 lawsuits against the order and its Salesianum School in Wilmington under the Delaware Child Victims Act for charges of sexual abuse of minors by its priests.

According to the settlement announced Aug. 4, the plaintiffs in the Delaware Superior Court lawsuits will share $24.8 million paid on behalf of the order with significant contributions from insurance carriers.

Oblate Father James J. Greenfield, provincial of the Wilmington-Philadelphia province, which includes 170 priests, brothers and seminarians, said that while he is grateful the suits are settled, he knows there is more work to be done toward healing and reconciliation.

"We hope that through authentic conversations with those who have been hurt, we can reach this goal together," Father Greenfield said in a statement. "The pain of the survivors is real. Their stories are real. And our response is real.

"I am sorry in the name of all Oblates for anything that an Oblate has done to violate a trust or to harm a person. We are committed to the restoration of trust."

Father Greenfield also released the names of 12 Oblates, living and deceased, who were accused of abusing young people in incidents between 1955 and 1991.

Among the nonmonetary terms of the settlement is the requirement the order keep the names of the 12 on its web page at www.oblates.org for 10 years. The order also must allow survivors of abuse to post a letter about their story on its website.

He said eight of these Oblates, not all of whom were priests, are deceased. Four are living in monitored locations, after having been removed from ministry.

The settlement money will come entirely from the insurance carrier contributions and the order's assets, Father Greenfield said.

Although Salesianum, the high school for boys run by the Oblates since 1903, also was named a defendant in each lawsuit, "we are not going to Salesianum for payment; we want the school to continue to flourish," he explained.

Father Greenfield said that while the Oblates' policies and programs to prevent sexual abuse are reaccredited every three years by Praesidium, an agency that specializes in abuse risk management, a nonmonetary provision of the Aug. 4 settlement requires an investigation by an independent agency as a second level of protection and assurance against abuse.

"That is absolutely a positive development to do that," the provincial said.

Praesidium's audits have been comprehensive, Father Greenfield noted. The agency's clients include the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Boys and Girls Clubs. "They are very thorough in their evaluations," the priest said. "They have wide access to our operations. We won't get accreditation if we don't follow all 25 standards."

Father Greenfield said Salesianum School will also use Praesidium to train the faculty and staff in warning signs of abuse.

The order also "follows to the letter" the U.S. bishops' "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" and additional sex abuse prevention guidelines developed by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, he said.

Praesidium also monitors how the order supervises its members who have been removed from ministry.

Those priests "have no faculties, no ecclesiastical endorsement to do any public ministry anywhere in the world," Father Greenfield said. The men engage in useful work that's "completely within the confines of the religious community. ... Providing both supervision and dignified work is a Christian course of action."

The Aug. 4 settlement gives the order and its insurance companies 45 days to provide the $24.8 million. "Insurance companies leading the way for well over half of the settlement costs is a tremendous help," Father Greenfield said.

"To a man, we Oblates of St. Francis de Sales recognize the pain of anyone who has been abused and we want to do the right thing to help that man and woman heal and move on from this sad experience. We want to do everything we can to heal and reconcile everyone."

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