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Milwaukee archdiocese set to release documents on clergy sex abuse

by Marie Rohde

Milwaukee — Lawyers representing the victims of clergy sex abuse in the Milwaukee archdiocese said documents slated for release Monday afternoon will reveal greater insight into the role of the Vatican and local church leaders in priest abuse cases. The lawyers also hinted that New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan may have moved church assets before leaving Milwaukee in an effort to protect them from a bankruptcy filing.

In a statement released this weekend, Archbishop Jerome ListECKI warned readers of the documents to "prepare to be shocked" and that "news about this topic can shake one's faith." He pleaded with readers to understand the "evolution of thinking" on sexual abuse of children since the 1970s.

"Church leaders and other professionals tried their best to deal with the issue given the knowledge available at the time," he said.

The more than 6,000 pages of documents include:

- The deposition of Dolan, archbishop of Milwaukee from June 2002 to February 2009, now the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Jeff Anderson, the lead lawyer representing the more than 570 victims who have filed claims, said in a press release that Dolan's activities leading to the filing of the bankruptcy will be revealed. Lawyers for the victims earlier said Dolan transferred \$55 million to a cemetery fund in order to protect it from claims. Another \$35 million was transferred to parishes, they said. Bankruptcy Judge Susan V. Kelley ruled that money could not be touched. Lawyers for the claimants could appeal that ruling.
- The deposition of former Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland could reveal specifics on the handling of sex abuse cases by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI.

Weakland wrote in a book that Vatican officials refused to defrock Fr. Lawrence Murphy, a priest believed to have abused 200 deaf children. Anderson sued the Vatican for fraud in 2010 but dropped the case two years later.

- The deposition of now-retired Auxiliary Bishop Richard Sklba, a man Weakland described as his "go-to guy" for abuse cases. In an article written for the archdiocesan newspaper, Sklba said he was trying to provide context for his deposition. His article provides hints of the deposition, among the most startling being that "later in the 1990s" a panel was formed to consider the conditions needed for the reassignment of offenders. Some were reassigned until as late as 2002. (Listecki in his statement acknowledged that eight of the 22 who were reassigned abused again.)
- The deposition of Daniel Budzynski, a priest ordained in 1957 who retired in 1994. He was on an archdiocesan list of priests who had substantiated claims of abuse made against them.
- Personnel files of more than 40 priests. Those internal church documents will show how church officials responded to allegations of abuse, including moving them from one assignment to another without notifying anyone of the offender's past misconduct. SNAP Wisconsin, a group of survivors working for more than 20 years on abuse issues, criticized the list of offenders compiled by the archdiocese as incomplete and lacking in the credibility of one compiled by an independent review. They listed three current cases involving priests who have been removed amid allegations as well as a large number of religious order priests. They also note three permanent deacons, several nuns and others working for the church.

While the release of the documents is a watershed moment, resolution of neither the bankruptcy nor the claims brought by the victims is near.

The archdiocese is challenging most of the 570 victims who filed claims. In February, Kelley ruled that a handful of the claims made would go to trial in her court, saying they would represent the more than 400 claims church lawyers say should be dismissed.

Meanwhile, the church has not presented a reorganization plan or a list of assets that could be sold to pay the claims.

The Milwaukee archdiocese filed for bankruptcy 30 months ago, a move that put on hold a dozen lawsuits brought by abuse victims in state court. At the time, Listecki said the Milwaukee church already spent approximately \$29 million over 20 years on lawsuits, settlements and related matters.

A pair of court rulings issued by the Wisconsin Supreme Court largely protected the church from lawsuits when it found that the church could not be sued to negligent supervision of offenders. Later, the door for lawsuits opened when the court ruled that the church could be sued if officials knew of misconduct and moved the offenders into assignments where they reoffended. Several of the 10 lawsuits brought against the Milwaukee archdiocese were on the verge of going to trial when the bankruptcy was filed. The church also was facing greater jeopardy because of other state court rulings that said insurance policies do not cover fraud.

Documents filed Friday show that the church has spent \$5,329,012 on legal fees, including nearly \$166,000 to its own lawyers in the most recently monthly report. In February, the archdiocese warned it would run out of money to fully fund operations by April, but that date has come and gone without further comment.

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[Marie Rohde writes from Milwaukee.]

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