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Archdiocese of Portland hands over deeds to 124 parishes

by Nancy Haught by Religion News Service

PORTLAND, Ore. (RNS) The Catholic Archdiocese of Portland is sorting out who owns hundreds of millions of dollars in church property and handing the deeds over to its 124 parishes.

The change is required by the bankruptcy settlement last April between the archdiocese and claimants. But a critic considers it a pointless maneuver meant to protect the archdiocese from future lawsuits.

In 2004, the Portland Archdiocese became the first U.S. Catholic diocese to declare bankruptcy; four other dioceses later followed suit. Portland emerged from bankruptcy with a \$75 million settlement last year.

As part of the deal, parishes will receive the legal titles of their real property, including churches, schools and meetings halls, by the end of the month. Until now, almost all parish real estate deeds were in the name of the archdiocese.

During two-year bankruptcy proceedings, the archdiocese argued that parish real estate could not be sold for the settlement because it was held in trust for the parishes. But critics say the new structure creates the impression that the property is safe from future lawsuits.

"Once again, the church attempts to deceive the rank and file into believing they have some control," said Bill Crane, director of Oregon Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "At the end of the day, when all is said and done, it's the bishops and the hierarchy who do."

Archbishop John Vlazny outlined the plan in a March 14 letter to parishioners recently distributed in churches.

"Most parishioners will not notice any difference in the life of the parish as a result of the restructuring," he wrote.

The restructuring is one of the last requirements that the archdiocese must fulfill in the \$75 million bankruptcy settlement that provided financial relief for about 175 people who say they were sexually abused by priests.

In theory, one parish could be sued under the new plan but the other parishes would not need to worry that their property would be seized for a settlement, an issue that took months to resolve during the bankruptcy.

But it hasn't been tested in court, said Albert N. Kennedy, who represented plaintiffs during the bankruptcy. The restructuring will not affect future claims covered by last year's bankruptcy settlement. And he's not sure it would simplify any court cases down the line.

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"In fact, the archbishop is in control of the entire archdiocese, and that is not going to change," he said. "All the control is still in one person." -- Nancy Haug

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