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PJ D'Amico said he was a sixth grader the first time his priest sexually abused him. He said Fr. Alfred Soave, then-pastor at St. Hugh of Lincoln Church in Huntington Station, New York, abused him repeatedly through the eighth grade. D'Amico, 57, will receive compensation starting in 2025 from the Diocese of Rockville Centre. (Courtesy of PJ D'Amico)



by Sean Piccoli

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**Editor's note:** *The Catholic Church has spent billions of dollars settling claims from sexual abuse cases. National Catholic Reporter is investigating the costs to Catholics, parishes and the church in its new series "[The Reckoning](#)." NCR's investigative reports, including this series, are made possible in part through the generosity of Annette Lomont.*

*This is Part 2 of a two-part story on the sexual abuse settlement in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York. You can read [Part 1 here](#).*



(NCR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

PJ D'Amico said his "45-year ordeal" began the first time he was sexually abused by his priest.

D'Amico was a sixth grader who worshiped with his family at St. Hugh of Lincoln Church in Huntington Station, New York. He said the pastor at St. Hugh of Lincoln, Fr. Alfred B. Soave, abused him repeatedly through the eighth grade, including on the

day of his confirmation.

D'Amico, 57, is one of about 600 survivors of sexual abuse who will receive approximately \$323 million in payments beginning this year from the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York, which oversees St. Hugh of Lincoln and 135 other parishes on New York's Long Island. After four years of federal bankruptcy proceedings, the Diocese of Rockville Centre agreed to settle the claims brought by people who said dozens of priests and other adults employed by the diocese sexually abused them in previous decades.

## **Your help with 'The Reckoning'**

If you have any tips, leads, suggestions or information about the costs of the sexual abuse scandal on Catholics, orders, parishes, communities, dioceses or the church, please email [ncr\\_editor@ncronline.org](mailto:ncr_editor@ncronline.org) with the subject line "The Reckoning."

[A federal judge approved the bankruptcy settlement](#) in December, clearing the way for survivors to begin receiving restitution. For D'Amico, the settlement comes as both a relief and a painful reminder of a long struggle with a trusted institution that exposed him to lasting harm and then declared bankruptcy when faced with a deluge of lawsuits.

"It was more like 'uncle' than 'do the right thing,' " he said of the diocese's ultimate decision to reach an agreement that will compensate him and other abuse victims. "They finally realized it was going to cost more not to settle and made a pragmatic decision."

John Salveson, who said he was [sexually abused by a Long Island priest beginning in 1969](#) at age 13 and received compensation from the diocese in 2017 under a different program, agreed that the bankruptcy settlement feels more practical than moral.

"This is strictly an economic issue for them," Salveson told the National Catholic Reporter. "This is a risk-management issue for them. And I spent way too many years trying to get them to see this as a moral issue. They just don't think it's a moral issue."

For his part, D'Amico said, "The monetary resolution is going to be both hard to accept and a relief to accept."

**[Related: Long Island, New York, parishes forced to pay millions to settle sex abuse claims](#)**

D'Amico's Florida-based lawyer, Adam Horowitz, called the settlement a "milestone" for his 24 clients, ages 40-75, and the hundreds of others who were victimized as boys and teens.

"It's a large sum of money that is a recognition that abuse occurred on a really large scale," Horowitz said of the estimated \$323 million. For abuse survivors, he said the settlement — both in its financial terms and other provisions for holding the diocese to account — is "a validation and a recognition that this happened, that they're believed, and there was a serious wrong that occurred."

The settlement doesn't address every case of abuse, Horowitz said. "There are many more survivors than the 600 who came forward," he said, including "many who I spoke to who missed the deadline" to file claims against the diocese for past abuses.

Horowitz said a critical outcome of the bankruptcy settlement is that the diocese will have to publicly disclose the identities and personnel files of all known abusers and all who were credibly accused of child sex abuse while working under the diocese's supervision as priests or in other roles.

'The monetary resolution is going to be both hard to accept and a relief to accept.'

—PJ D'Amico

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The names of more than 100 priests already appear in civil and bankruptcy court documents. Horowitz estimated that as many as 170 perpetrators have been identified, in all, over the course of the proceedings.

Whatever the exact figure, the diocese will have to produce a comprehensive accounting of it, available for public review, although the logistics of how and where to house the documents and make them accessible is still being worked out,



Horowitz said.

"There will be a record of who knew what and when they knew it," he said.



The Rockville Centre Diocese's vocations office sponsored a "Holy Hour for Vocations" prayer service pictured at Immaculate Conception Seminary on Jan. 6, 2023, in Huntington, New York. About 600 sex abuse survivors will receive about \$323 million from the diocese starting in 2025. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Jeff Anderson, a Minnesota-based lawyer who represented abuse victims against the Rockville Centre Diocese, likewise called the disclosure requirement "an enormous victory" for survivors and "a step that the survivors demanded."

But to hear Anderson tell it, the path to a settlement should have been less agonizing.

"I would describe this as a shameful and sorrowful saga, born from a tragedy compounded by the bishop and their lawyers," he said, adding, "They put the survivors through an ordeal that was born of treachery and hardball tactics." Some survivors waiting on a settlement died before the case was resolved, he said.

"The bankruptcy process was protracted and made more difficult by plaintiff attorneys' relentless focus on litigation," a spokesman for the Rockville Centre Diocese said in response, "sadly putting more money into the hands of lawyers, and less into those of survivors."

### **Moved by 'horrors'**

In an [open letter posted to the diocese's web site in December](#) and addressed to "All Survivors of Sexual Abuse," Bishop John Barres of Rockville Centre thanked survivors "for coming forward, for the ways in which you carry your crosses, and for working for justice and the protection of children."

Barres wrote that as a bishop he has met with and personally apologized to abuse survivors. "I am deeply moved by the accounts of trauma and the fact that these horrors were perpetrated by those who should have been leading others to Christ," he wrote. He also offered a further apology: "I am truly sorry for the evil done to you. I am sorry for the failures of the Church and her leaders in addressing these horrors."



Bishop John Barres of Rockville Centre, New York, delivers the homily at the 70th annual Red Mass at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle Oct. 2, 2022, in Washington. (CNS/John Carroll Society via Catholic Standard/Christopher Newkumet)

The letter also referenced reforms the diocese announced in 2003, the same year a grand jury in Long Island's Suffolk County issued [a scathing report](#) detailing sexual abuse by priests and a culture of "secrecy and obfuscation" within the diocese. The grand jury did not issue indictments, citing the statute of limitations on criminal sexual abuse charges, but concluded that diocesan officials had used "deception and intimidation to prevent victims from seeking legal solutions to their problems."

"The Diocese made a commitment in 2003, and we continue to devote ourselves to the protection of children as part of the Church's mission," Barres wrote. "Strict protocols, zero tolerance for abuse, careful screening, and training have all become the norm for those in ministry, employees and volunteers. We will not grow lax in these commitments and will remain vigilant."

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D'Amico, who lives in Colorado and has become an advocate for other victims, said he wishes the bankruptcy agreement included an independent oversight body to monitor the diocese's abuse prevention measures. He also wishes that money had been set aside to help abuse victims continue to work through their traumatic experiences in therapeutic settings.

"I think it's an ongoing struggle for everyone," he said.

He said that the goal for abuse survivors like himself is "to do the best with what's been made available."

Speaking by telephone, D'Amico said he was standing outside an ashram — a house of worship and spiritual retreat that he belongs to in rural Colorado whose teachings trace back to Hindu and other Eastern religious traditions.

"I have no relationship with the Roman Catholic Church," he said. The priest he said assaulted him, Soave, died in 1999.

D'Amico said he anticipates receiving between \$100,000 and \$600,000. He said he will use some of his settlement money to contribute to an organization that promotes healing from childhood sexual abuse. He is thinking about taking time off work to write a book. He also plans to make a trip back east.

"I am going to go to the church where this happened to me and make a commitment for forgiveness of the perpetrator who did this to me," he said. After that, he said his next plan is to "move on to my life."

This story appears in the **The Reckoning** feature series. [View the full series.](#)