News

by Mark Dent

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After a court challenge from clergy members that has lasted more than a month, the long-awaited grand jury report on child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church throughout Pennsylvania is finally slated to be released.

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court, in a 31-page ruling, stated the report must be made public by Aug. 14 and could become available as early as Aug. 7. It is supposed to detail sexual abuse and cover-ups perpetrated by more than 300 priests.

The report was disseminated three months ago to the six dioceses under investigation — Allentown, Altoona-Johnstown, Erie, Greensburg, Harrisburg, Pittsburgh and Scranton — and was expected to be released to the public in late June. But more than a dozen people, mostly clergy members, according to the Supreme Court, had challenged its release. They argued the report would harm their reputations and that they had not been given an adequate opportunity to respond to accusations. Most of the challengers were not permitted to provide testimony to the grand jury.

The challenge from clergy came after officials from the Pennsylvania dioceses said they would not oppose the report's public release. Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro wrote Pope Francis a letter in late June, indicating two Pennsylvania church leaders, whom he did not name, had orchestrated the challenge.

"Please call on them to 'follow the path of truth' you laid out," Shapiro wrote to Francis, "and permit the healing process to begin."

Erie Bishop Lawrence Persico, who in April released a list of former Erie clergy implicated in sexual assault allegations, has maintained he did not challenge the report.

"The bishops of all of the Pennsylvania dioceses involved with the grand jury report about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church have indicated publicly that they fully support release of the report," he said in a statement. "I reiterate that I have neither directly nor indirectly taken any steps to block its release."

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The imminent release of the grand jury report has put the Harrisburg Diocese* on the offensive. Harrisburg Bishop Ronald Gainer revealed Wednesday the names of all individuals connected with the diocese who had been the subject of sexual abuse allegations.

The diocese also launched a new website devoted to sexual abuse awareness and announced it would remove from all diocesam buildings, rooms and facilities the names of all bishops who served Harrisburg since 1947.

"While these past harms cannot be undone, it is my hope that today I can do my part, as the present Chief Shepherd of the Diocese, to salve some of these historic wounds with the healing touch of transparency," Gainer said in a statement.

The gesture didn't impress Shapiro. Spokesperson Joe Grace, in a statement, noted the decisions made by the Harrisburg Diocese were past due and only came after pressure from the public and the grand jury report. He said an earlier court opinion showed Harrisburg wanted to end the grand jury investigation.

Shapiro and other lawmakers see another way for the Catholic Church to make amends. They want church leaders to endorse legislation that would erase the statute of limitations on sex crimes and allow past victims to seek civil damages for abuse that occurred at any point in their lives. The legislation has been on the drawing board for years, with major opposition coming from church leaders and the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference's lobbyists.

"The true test of the Dioceses' commitment to victims of abuse and reforms within the Church," said Grace, "will be their actions following the release of the report."

[Mark Dent is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia. His work has appeared in Slate, VICE, FiveThirtyEight, The Dallas Morning News, The Kansas City Star and many other publications.]

Correction: *An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified Harrisburg as an archdiocese and Bishop Ronald Gainer as an archbishop.*

Related: Grand jury report on abuse looms for six Pennsylvania dioceses