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Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, said the archdiocese planned to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection following the recommendation of several consultative groups.

He announced the plan Nov. 29 at a news conference at the Catholic Center in Albuquerque after a mandatory meeting with archdiocesan priests.

The archbishop explained that he had considered filing for bankruptcy protection in recent years and decided to take the action because the archdiocese faces up to 40 active claims from alleged victims of clergy sex abuse.

"We could see where this was all heading and the trajectory wasn't changing," he told reporters. "We just don't have any money. If we're not here, we can't help anybody."

The archdiocese planned to file the case during early December, Wester said.

The announcement was the second major occurrence related to clergy sex abuse within the archdiocese in two days. Agents from the office of New Mexico's attorney general executed a search warrant Nov. 28 to obtain records from the archdiocese regarding at least two former priests credibly accused of child sexual abuse.

Attorney General Hector Balderas was seeking information on Marvin Archuleta and Sabine Griego, according to the archdiocese.

In a statement attributed to the archbishop, the archdiocese said the decision to seek bankruptcy protection was not intended to sidestep its responsibility to abuse victims.

"I want to make clear that our first and foremost concern is the victims of sexual abuse and our desire to do all we can to provide for their just compensation," Wester's statement said. "Reorganization helps us to provide in an equitable manner, especially for those who could come forward in the future as well as those who have already taken the courageous step of making a claim."

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The announcement said victims and their attorneys will "be full and active participants in the reorganization," the statement said.

The Albuquerque Journal daily newspaper reported that Wester estimated that "millions of dollars" in claims have been paid by the archdiocese through its insurance carriers and from reserve funds.

"We're not a rich church. It's not a wealthy archdiocese. The churches, the parishes, the schools are going forward in their own way. The cases we've mediated and compensated have come from our reserves," he said.

Wester also noted that "a significant part of our daily operation is our ongoing effort to heal and protect." He said that for the past 25 years, the archdiocese has had a "zero tolerance" policy and removes permanently from ministry any priest, deacon, staff member or volunteer who is "credibly accused" of abuse. The abuse also is reported to law enforcement, he added.

Measures the Santa Fe Archdiocese has taken since 1993 include having a full-time victims' assistance coordinator in place since 1993, an Independent Review Board, a system for required background checks of all church personnel and abuse awareness training.

Once its case is filed, the archdiocese would be among 20 dioceses nationwide that have sought bankruptcy protection.

The archdiocese also would become the second in New Mexico to seek bankruptcy protection because of clergy sex abuse. The Diocese of Gallup closed its bankruptcy case in early 2017 after more than three years of hearings and negotiations. The diocese paid more than $17.6 million to compensate clergy sex abuse claimants under provisions of the settlement agreement.