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The Roman Catholic Diocese of Buffalo announced Feb. 4 it will "cease operations" at its seminary at the end of the academic year, citing annual operating losses and low enrollment.

Christ the King Seminary has trained priests for more than 100 years but has lost an average of $500,000 a year for the past 10 with no end in sight, the diocese said in a statement following a vote by the seminary's board of trustees.

There are 26 seminarians enrolled — about 10% percent of capacity — this academic year, including 15 who are on track to be priests in the Diocese of Buffalo. Those who do not graduate in May could continue their studies at colleges, universities or other theologates, the diocese said.

A steering committee, meanwhile, will be appointed to recommend models for the future preparation of priests, said Albany Bishop Edward Scharfenberger, who is temporarily overseeing the Buffalo diocese.

"This is not just about numbers on a balance sheet that don't add up," Scharfenberger said in a video message. "We are fully committed to attracting, educating and forming priests for the future needs of our diocese."

The western New York diocese last week reported a $5 million loss in 2019 and said bankruptcy was imminent after being named in more than 220 lawsuits under the state's Child Victims Act, which suspended the statute of limitations of abuse claims for one year beginning last August.

The clergy misconduct crisis has touched the seminary. A former seminarian last year publicly complained that his harassment complaint against a priest had been ignored, while another withdrew from his studies while calling the diocese's handling of misconduct cases "disgusting and revolting."

Also in 2019, several seminarians reported they had been subjected to offensive sexual discussions by diocesan priests at a party. Three priests were temporarily suspended.

Christ the King Seminary was founded in 1857 as part of St. Bonaventure University. The seminary was incorporated separately from the university in 1974 and relocated to East Aurora, 20 miles southeast of Buffalo.

Scharfenberger said the steering committee would also study whether to sell or repurpose the 132-acre campus and its buildings.

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