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The Roman Catholic Diocese of Buffalo has taken legal action seeking to stop all outstanding clergy sexual abuse lawsuits while it navigates bankruptcy proceedings in federal court.

The diocese filed a motion in federal bankruptcy court on May 2 seeking an injunction on lawsuits filed under New York's Child Victims Act. About 250 lawsuits have been filed against the diocese since August, when the act gave victims one year to pursue even decades-old allegations of abuse.

Lawsuits against the diocese were moved to bankruptcy court in February and permanently frozen, but the bankruptcy filing only temporarily halted lawsuits against individual parishes or Catholic schools. Those cases could be moved back into state supreme court unless the diocese is granted a permanent injunction.

"Pausing litigation will allow for all parties to engage in settlement negotiations in the context of the diocese's Chapter 11 case and to attempt to reach a global resolution of all claims (including claims against parishes and schools), without the distraction of piecemeal litigation," the diocese said in a statement May 4.

The diocese said continued litigation would deplete its insurance reserves and reduce future settlements to survivors.

But lawyers representing abuse survivors said the injunction is designed to keep their clients from having their day in court, prevent access to priest personnel records and allow parishes and schools to protect their financial assets.

“This legal maneuver by the Diocese of Buffalo is just another example of the Catholic Church coldly putting its needs before the needs of victims,” said Boston attorney Mitchell Garabedian, who represents 39 clients suing the diocese. He said a hearing on the injunction is set for May 20.

“This is a very aggressive move,” Buffalo attorney Steven Boyd said May 4. “We feel it is an unnecessary move because we’ve been negotiating with them in good faith.”

The diocese previously announced it would cease financial support and health benefits for 23 priests with substantiated allegations of sexual abuse beginning May 1 as part of the bankruptcy process. None were in active ministry.

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