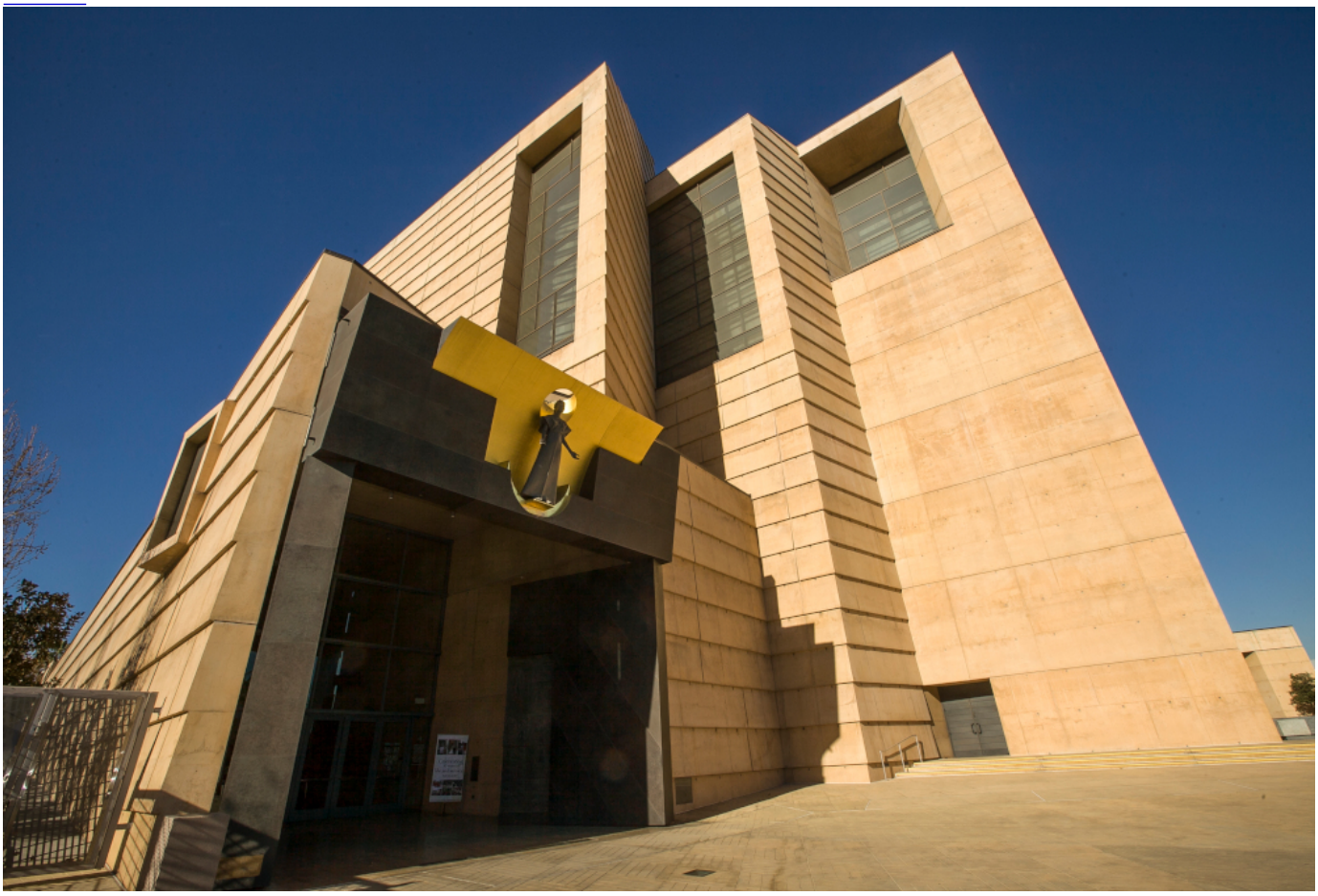
News



This Jan. 21, 2013 file photo shows the entrance to the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, the headquarters for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles. California Roman Catholic bishops are asking a judge to throw out a 2019 law that allowed alleged victims of clergy sexual abuse to sue even if they were molested decades ago. (AP File/Damian Dovarganes)

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Most California Roman Catholic bishops are asking a judge to throw out a 2019 law that allowed accusers of clergy sexual abuse to sue even if they were molested decades ago.

Motions filed in January in southern and northern superior courts ask judges to rule Assembly Bill 218 unconstitutional. Among the arguments was the assertion that the amount of time that had passed could make it harder for the defense to gather evidence.

California is one of at least 15 states that have extended the window for people to sue institutions over long-ago abuse, leading to thousands of new cases.

California in 2019 provided a three-year period that began on Jan. 1, 2020 permitting suits in cases that exceeded the statute of limitations. It also extended the age of people who could sue for childhood sexual abuse from 26 to 40 after the extension expires and allowed triple damages in cases where abuse resulted from a "cover-up" of previous assaults by an employee or volunteer.

About 100 cases have been or are expected to be filed since then but attorney John Manley, who has handled some of them, said there eventually could be 500 to 1,500 cases filed involving the church and thousands more involving other institutions such as school districts.

The motions challenging AB218 were filed on behalf of the archbishop of Los Angeles — which heads the nation's largest archdiocese with some 5 million parishioners in several counties — as well as the archbishop of San Francisco and the bishops of Orange, Fresno, Monterey, Oakland, Sacramento, San Jose and Santa Rosa.

The motion filed in Alameda County argues that the law revives "long-expired claims" that already had been revived under a 2003 extension, "making it inevitable that witnesses will have died, memories faded, and documents may have been lost. This reality absolutely impairs the defendants' ability to defend themselves."

The motion filed in Los Angeles argued that the law "seeks to correct an injustice that does not exist with regard to the church defendants," adding that "the Legislature had no evidence of widespread abuse after 2003 and no evidence of cover-up."

The bishops have "'great remorse for crimes committed against victims" and have made reforms, the motion said.

But Manly called the motions "morally reprehensible and hypocritical."

The church "was well aware that they had a massive molestation problem by priests," Manly said. "They systematically violated reporting laws ... lied to the families, lied to the media, lied to the faithful. Now what they are saying is, 'Don't allow our victims to hold us accountable.'"

Priests who molested children committed "emotional murder," Manly argued. "There's no statute of limitations on murder ... on kidnapping. There shouldn't be a statute of limitations for child molestation."

The California church already paid more than $1.2 billion to hundreds of victims to settle claims made during the 2003 extension.

In 2019, The Associated Press estimated that a wave of new laws in 15 states allowing people to make claims of sexual abuse going back decades could lead to thousands of new cases and more than $4 billion in payouts.

Last June, U.S. Roman Catholic bishops said the church had tallied more than 4,400 sex abuse allegations against clergy in the 2018-19 audit year — triple the number from the previous year.

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This story has been corrected to accurately refer to Assembly Bill 218.

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