News



A mural decorates a building once part of the now defunct clergy treatment center operated by the Servants of the Paraclete in Jemez Springs, New Mexico. The men's religious order will help fund a $121.5 settlement between the Santa Fe Archdiocese and claimants in sexual abuse cases. (NCR photo/Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola)

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An unprecedented public archive of clergy sexual abuse documents is being established at the University of New Mexico thanks to a collaborative agreement between abuse survivors and the Archdiocese of Santa Fe.

The archive, documenting one of the U.S. Catholic Church's epicenters of sexual abuse and coverup, is the result of a commitment Santa Fe Archbishop John Wester made to the creditors' committee that represented clergy sex abuse claimants in the archdiocese's concluding Chapter 11 bankruptcy case.

The archdiocese, five participating religious orders and their insurers are funding the $121.5 million settlement trust, finalized in December 2022. In addition, the religious orders will contribute more than $7.7 million for specific claims against their members.

Albuquerque attorney Brad Hall, along with law partner Levi Monagle and co-counsel Lisa Ford, represented 145 abuse survivors in the bankruptcy — more than one-third of the 395 claimants. Hall told NCR he hopes Santa Fe's abuse document archive will become a template for current and future Chapter 11 cases involving sexual abuse.

"Everybody on our side — the survivors' side — is hopeful that this will become some kind of model, or at least all the parties in all these other Chapter 11s across the country will be aware of it, and survivors everywhere can make it a condition of approving any plan," Hall said in an interview.

> 'The significance of the archdiocese in the abuse crisis, as it was revealed in the '90s, is going to be understood in a way that it never has before.'
> —Terry McKiernan
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Charles Paez, chairman of the creditors committee, said he suggested an abuse document archive to the archbishop in an initial bankruptcy court hearing called a 341 meeting.

Paez said the idea was first raised by Hall in the committee's early meetings with attorneys for survivors.

"I think that once he brought it up, I think we all were onboard and thought, 'What a great idea this is,' " Paez said in a phone interview.

Paez said he drafted a statement for the 341 meeting that included a request to Wester to create a public abuse documents archive. To Paez's surprise, the archbishop agreed.

"I was surprised that he said yes because I completely expected him to say no," Paez said. "I think we all expected him to say no."

In a phone interview, Wester cited both transparency and healing as the reasons he agreed to establish the archive.

"I think one way to bring healing is through transparency," Wester said. "So, this is an archive, a kind of a public way of people being able to see what happened here. And, of course, for those who have been abused, it helps them to see a certain validation … and they can see some of the facts that might help them in their own healing."

Wester said it was important to mention the archive is just one of many non-monetary covenants the archdiocese is undertaking. Other non-monetary efforts, he said, include offering restorative justice programs, healing services and meetings with abuse survivors.

"We're doing a lot to try to really be a healing presence just beyond the financial aspect of it," Wester said. "So, the archive is just one of many, many things that we're doing."



Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, shown in a November 2022 file photo, supports the creation of a public archive of clergy sexual abuse documents to be housed at the University of New Mexico. "I think one way to bring healing is through transparency," he said. (CNS screen grab/YouTube, Archdiocese of Santa Fe)

The University of New Mexico's Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections will house the archive in its Zimmerman Library. The archdiocese will pay the university $106,000 to cover expenses related to hiring a professional archivist to organize the archive over a two-year period. After that, the university will assume maintenances costs and have title to the document copies.

The archive agreement states the archive will include documents "including but not limited to" clergy personnel files, other perpetrator personnel files, victim files, investigative files, investigative transcripts, depositions, clergy risk assessments, minutes of Personnel Board and Permanent Review Board meetings, assignment records, seminary records, statements given to investigators or law enforcement, and under oath proof of claim forms from the Chapter 11 case.

Attorneys for both the archdiocese and the creditors' committee agreed on redaction protocols to redact identifying information about victims and their families, social security numbers and financial information, and confidential information protected by state and federal statutes.

Abuse claimants can choose to opt in on including their own "victim file" documents, proof of claim forms, interrogatory answers, or depositions in the archive. They can also choose a specific level of redaction — or no redaction — of their own documents.

Until the archive opens to the public in a couple years, it's unclear how many pages of documents it will contain.



The Archdiocese of Santa Fe's Abuse Documents Archive will be housed in the Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, located in the Zimmerman Library at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. (NCR photo/Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola)

Hall said each law firm involved in the bankruptcy can also submit their own documents. The non-monetary covenants also state other abuse survivors will be able to "tell their stories" by providing documents to the archive.

Terry McKiernan, the co-director of BishopAccountability.org, the online database of Catholic clergy sex abuse, believes the page count will be substantial.

"A fair number of dioceses have been prevailed upon to release documents, but none even close to on this scale," McKiernan said in a phone interview.

McKiernan cited a list of archive documents on its website obtained from nearly three dozen Catholic dioceses and religious orders. The list, last updated in April 2020, totals 243,770 pages. Archdiocese of Boston documents represent the largest number, with 45,693 pages of priest files and depositions from publicly filed court cases.

Although McKiernan voiced a number of questions and concerns regarding what may be left out of the archive — from the redaction decisions to the possible exclusion of notable abusers, such as the late Santa Fe Archbishop Robert Sanchez — he described the archive agreement as "absolutely amazing."

"The significance of the archdiocese in the abuse crisis, as it was revealed in the '90s, is going to be understood in a way that it never has before," McKiernan said.



Albuquerque attorney Brad Hall hopes the public clergy abuse archive in New Mexico will become a model for other dioceses. (NCR photo/Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola)

Hall said the archive will present a devastating portrait of the impact clergy sex abuse has had on families in the archdiocese, particularly Hispanic families who were devoutly loyal to the church.

Hall pointed to a former treatment center in Jemez Springs, New Mexico, which was run by the Servants of the Paraclete order. The center is now known to have been used by dioceses across the country, and has been severely criticized for "recycling" abusive priests back into ministry without alerting their communities of their past records.

In addition to what he termed the "dangerously mentally deranged alcoholic pedophiles" that were sent to the Paraclete facility, Hall said the archdiocese had many other abusers that included out-of-state clergy, religious order members and New Mexican archdiocesan priests.

"The damage done is just unbelievable in some towns," Hall said.

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Albuquerque attorney Lisa Ford, who joined Hall as co-counsel on the abuse cases, agreed the archive will show Paraclete-treated "guest priests" didn't represent all prolific abusers operating in the archdiocese.

"The Paracletes had a few abusers who abused crazy numbers of children — the pathologically non-stoppable priests," she said. However, like Hall, Ford said the archdiocese trained many of its own equally horrific priest abusers.

"So, these guys were native born, raised, went through the Catholic Church in New Mexico, went to seminary up in Santa Fe for minor seminary, and were abusing at the same rates as the rest of the priests in New Mexico from the Paracletes," she said.

Ford, who also has a master's of theological studies from a Catholic college, said she hopes multiple disciplinary areas of study will be conducted on the archive once it opens.

"I think it's fantastic that an institution of higher learning is actually willing to undertake the documents," Ford said. "It's a first step towards giving credibility to the fact that this needs to be studied."

Portia Vescio, a special collections archivist at UNM, provided the following statement from university officials about the archive: "As part of the mission of the UNM University Libraries we seek to provide access to collections that advance scholarship, teaching, and intellectual discovery. In preserving and providing access to the voices of abuse survivors, we expand opportunities for research, dialogue, and learning. We hope that this collection will provide greater understanding of these crimes, prevent future harms, and assist victims in finding support and healing."

Paez, the creditors' committee chairman, echoed that hope on behalf of abuse survivors.

"This is something that has never been done before, and I think that by being able to archive all this data, I think that it really drives home a point of accountability. And those archives are going to be there forever," Paez said. "And it really cements in stone that this is something that really happened."

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