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Pope Francis greets Bishop Joseph V. Brennan of Fresno, Calif., during a meeting with bishops from California, Hawaii and Nevada on their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican Jan. 27, 2020. (CNS/Vatican Media)

by OSV News

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Bishop Joseph V. Brennan said in a May 28 open letter that the Diocese of Fresno would file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization "to address the substantial number of claims brought forth by victims collectively."

The letter also said after a three-year window prompted by California state law "for individuals to bring forward otherwise barred or expired claims for sexual abuse suffered as a child," the diocese was "informed of 154 cases filed against our Diocese."

"The reopening of the window has made every Diocese in California susceptible to more claims," he said. "What we are facing gives us the opportunity to redouble our efforts in creating a safe environment for everyone in and out of the church and address real issues in atoning for the sin of clergy abuse against children."

Other dioceses in California — including San Francisco and Sacramento — have also recently filed for bankruptcy amid similar circumstances, as have dioceses across the country.

The bankruptcy process, for which he plans to file in August, Brennan said, "will allow us to address those claims honestly, compassionately and equitably."

Brennan said his "two definitive goals" are to "make sure we are handling claims of abuse with equitable compassion and resolving those claims as fairly as possible," and to "ensure the continuation of ministry within our Diocese."

"Requesting a court-supervised reorganization is the only path that allows us to meet the goals stated above," he said. "The reorganization ensures all victims are compensated fairly and funds are not depleted by the first few cases addressed."

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The process will also allow "the operations of our schools, parishes and organizations to continue uninterrupted, since the only entity filing for bankruptcy protection is the corporate sole, known legally as The Roman Catholic Bishop of Fresno," as "Catholic Charities and The Fresno Diocese Education Corporation," which operate its schools "are separate legal or ecclesial entities and will not be filing for bankruptcy protection," he added.

"When I hear how many lives were affected by clergy sexual abuse, my heart truly breaks. I imagine many of you are dismayed by the news of our serious financial situation, but I ask you to let go of your distress and turn your hearts towards the victims of abuse," Brennan said.

SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, criticized the approach in a statement, suggesting bankruptcy "is not the only way to achieve fair recoveries in all of the lawsuits against the Diocese."

"Protecting other boys and girls from being abused, and learning who made the decisions that resulted in a child predator working in their parish or school is important to survivors. However, the bankruptcy courts do not normally concern themselves with either issue. We are also concerned that important information will remain hidden from parishioners and the public because of this bankruptcy. We believe that churches and communities are more at risk when information about child predators remains secret," the statement said.

The Diocese of Fresno said on its website "The Chapter 11 process is extremely transparent and public."