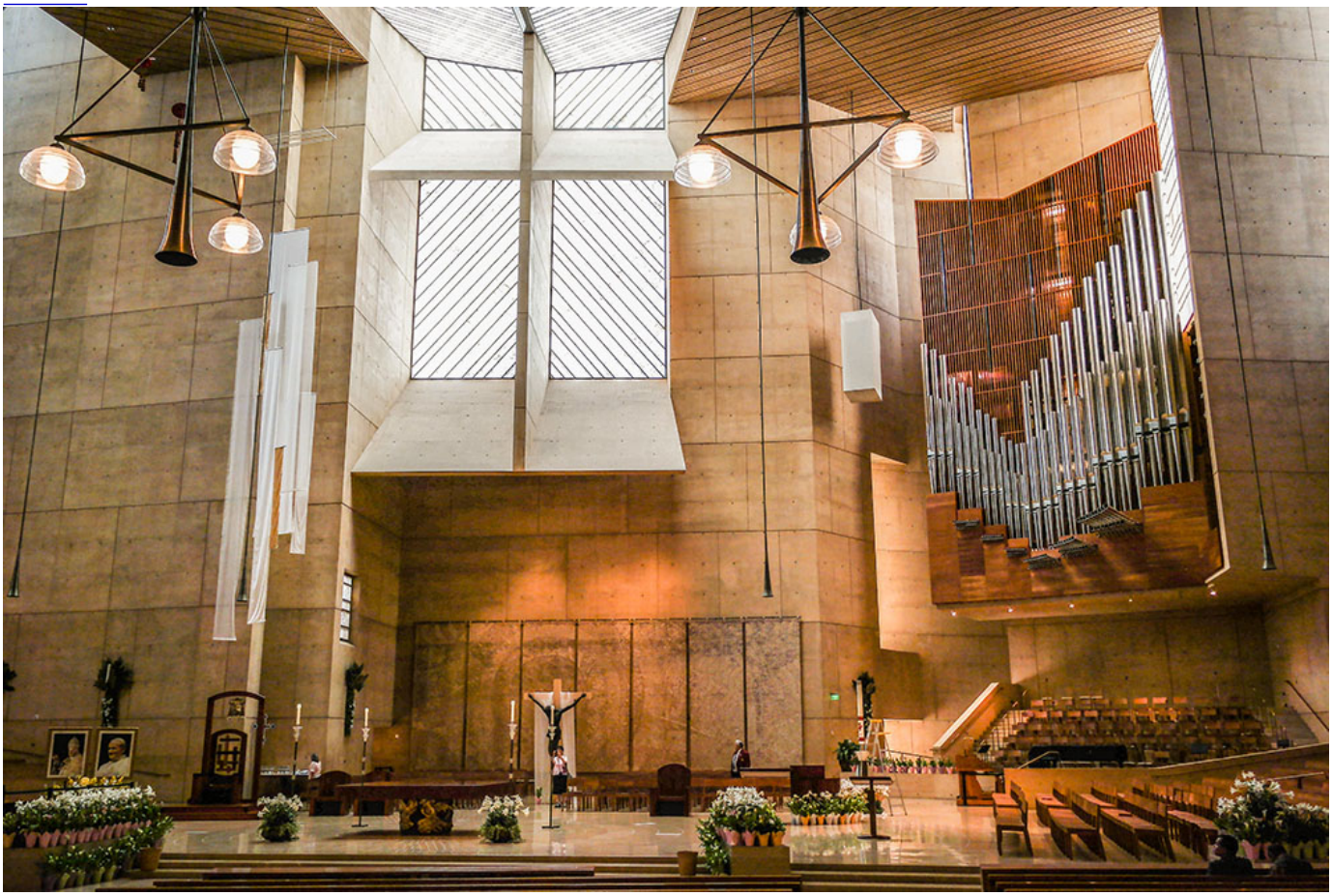
News



A view of the interior of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles Archdiocese announced Oct. 17 that it had agreed to settle a sexual abuse class action lawsuit for $880 million. (Wikimedia Commons/Visitor7)



by Alicia A. Caldwell

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Aimee Torres was in disbelief as she read the email from her lawyer on Wednesday telling her that the Los Angeles Archdiocese had finally agreed to settle a sexual abuse class action lawsuit for $880 million.

A childhood survivor of sexual abuse at the hands of a local Catholic priest who had befriended her family, Torres had long hoped for some acknowledgement of the abuse and a sense of justice. But part of her never expected it would actually happen, she told National Catholic Reporter in a phone interview a day after the settlement was announced.

"It's definitely something I never thought I'd see in this lifetime," Torres said, as she fought back tears. "I mentioned to my husband that I hoped it would be resolved before I was 40, to move on to the next chapter of my life without something glaring over my shoulder."

Torres will turn 40 in the spring.

The record settlement announced Oct. 17 is the latest the archdiocese has agreed to in the last several years. All told, the church has agreed to pay roughly $1.5 billion to thousands of abuse victims. Just a handful of other cases now remain.

The latest suit involved 1,353 plaintiffs, ranging in age from their 30s to their 70s, lawyers in the case said. Their claims of abuse are from as recently as the early 2000s.



Aimee Torres (Courtesy of Aimee Torres)

Morgan Stewart, a lead attorney in the case, said the agreement still needs to be ratified by the plaintiffs, an outcome he sees as likely.

"I feel confident based on responses from just my clients. It is, as [others] said, the best of bad options on both sides," Stewart said of the agreement. "It's a number that keeps [the archdiocese] out of bankruptcy and gets money in the survivors' pockets."

Bryan Smith, a Seattle-based attorney who also worked on the case, said the money will not fully heal the survivors, but he described the settlement as "some

semblance of justice" for them.

"I think it's as close as we could have gotten under these circumstances in this case," Smith said. "There is value in closure, as trite as that might sound. There is value in a settlement being reached that can actually result in a payout."

Stewart agreed, saying the plaintiffs' legal team pushed the archdiocese "right up to the limit. I think if we had pushed them any further on the numbers they would have declared bankruptcy."

In a statement announcing the settlement, Archbishop José Gomez apologized for the abuses carried out by priests and others working in the church.

"I am sorry for every one of these incidents, from the bottom of my heart," he wrote. "My hope is that this settlement will provide some measure of healing for what these men and women have suffered."

The lawsuit, which included decades-old abuse claims, was filed under a 2019 state law that offered an expanded window for abuse victims to file claims against their abusers. The law also allowed for triple the amount of damages in cases that involved a "cover-up" of earlier assaults.

Church officials initially fought the law, arguing that the law would allow for "potentially ruinous liability" for the church in California. California's highest court and the U.S. Supreme Court both declined to hear the challenge, allowing the law to go into effect and the class action case to proceed.

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Assuming the settlement is approved by the plaintiffs, the case could be fully resolved in the next year or so and payments awarded to each person. Smith said nonmonetary pieces of the settlement, including possible apology letters and other actions, have yet to be worked out.

Torres said the abuse at the hands of Fr. Honesto Bismonte, whom she knew as "Lolo Nes," which is Filipino for "Grandpa Nes," started when she was 8 years old and continued for nearly four years. In middle school, she tried to tell relatives, she said, but she was largely ignored.

"I grew up in a conservative Catholic Filipino family. Who do you talk to? Who do you run to when the abuser is a priest? Who do you go to?" she said.

Eventually, at 17, she confided in a school counselor and the abuse was reported to police. Even then, she said, she felt like she was being treated like the suspect, with her mental health stability questioned.

Bismonte was arrested in 2002 and charged with sexually abusing Torres and another young girl. He pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor battery charge and was sentenced to two years probation. Bismonte could not be reached for comment.



Monica Gutierrez Ringering (Courtesy of Monica Gutierrez Ringering)

Torres said she later learned that church officials had previously been told about abuse allegations against Bismonte but didn't do anything about it. Even after his guilty plea he remained a fixture in her family's lives, she said, exacerbating her already significant trauma.

"I don't think any amount of money is going to help solve this problem, but it's something," Torres said. "At least it's acknowledgement. But at the end of the day, what is going to happen? What is the aftermath of this?"

Among those earlier victims was Monica Gutierrez Ringering, who was 11 years old when Bismonte's abuse started.

"I feel a little nervous; I don't know what's going to happen next," Ringering said of the settlement. "It's been hard opening up. All my family is highly Catholic and it does feel very confusing, just knowing that it's coming to an end."

Ringering, 52, said Bismonte abused her for roughly a year, about a decade before he victimized Torres.

"The first time I opened up about the abuse it was hard; I was treated like a liar," she said. "I was only a child. I was around 11 years old. I had no one to talk to about it. I know there are more victims than the news says."

Torres and Ringering said they are hopeful the settlement will spur additional changes within the church to protect children. But neither is done speaking out, despite how difficult it has been.

"The trauma will never go away," Ringering said. "The fear is always there but we have to be brave."

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