Opinion
Guest Voices
Cathedral of Christ the Light in Oakland, Calif.

Worshippers are pictured in a file photo at the Cathedral of Christ the Light in Oakland, Calif. The Diocese of Oakland filed a formal Chapter 11 reorganization plan Nov. 8 in an effort to settle some 345 claims of sexual abuse. (OSV News/CNS file, Greg Tarczynski)



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Fr. Stephen M. Kiesle of the Diocese of Oakland, California, was convicted of lewd conduct for tying up and sexually abusing boys and was later sent to prison for abusing a girl. In 2023, he pleaded no contest to killing a pedestrian while driving drunk.

Fr. Mark Kristy of the Diocese of Sacramento was convicted of molesting a girl under 14 for three years and in 2022 was sentenced to a year in jail. For most of the last decade, he lived in Napa County.

Fr. Jean-Pierre Bongila of the San Francisco Archdiocese was sued for reportedly sexually abusing a girl. Church officials purportedly "cleared" him and he now works at a Catholic college in Minnesota.

Fr. John S. Crews of the Diocese of Santa Rosa, California, resigned in 2013 after he reportedly abused a boy. In 2022, church officials settled with a different man who said he was molested by Crews and others at the Hanna Boys Center in Sonoma*. (Crews now reportedly lives in South Carolina.)

With each of these credibly accused child molesters — and hundreds of other proven, admitted and publicly accused predator priests — a key question is "Did they act alone?

Or did a brother priest walk in on one of them and witness a rape in progress but keep silent? Or after someone reported the abuse to the higher-ups, did a church staffer shred incriminating documents? Or was a bishop told by a seminary official, even before the cleric was ordained, that the young man had some serious issues and shouldn't be allowed to become a priest?

Perhaps most important: Would an impartial jury, after examining all the evidence, find any or all of them guilty?

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Unfortunately, now we'll almost certainly get none of these answers. That's because their employers — the heads of northern California Catholic institutions — are in federal court crying "We're bankrupt" and seeking Chapter 11 protection.

And bankruptcy proceedings completely halt civil lawsuits and all that comes with them: depositions, discovery and document disclosures. Many suspect that's the main reason why church officials find Chapter 11 so attractive: It helps bishops keep their secrets about abuse secret.

In fact, in no part of the U.S. are more Catholic dioceses now in bankruptcy than here in northern California.

Four of the area's dioceses — San Francisco, Oakland, Sacramento and Santa Rosa — are in Chapter 11 proceedings. So too is an Oakland-based religious order, the Franciscans. The Diocese of Fresno has announced its intention to seek bankruptcy

protection, and the Diocese of Monterey has announced it is contemplating doing so as well. (Two other entities — the Jesuits' Oregon province and the Stockton Diocese — were in bankruptcy but have emerged from it.)

In each case, the church hierarchy cites hundreds of clergy sex abuse and cover-up lawsuits as the primary cause behind their legal move.

All these institutions, however, are fully functional, with no apparent restrictions or cut backs on their operations or activities.

So in practical terms, what does it mean that these Catholic entities are in Chapter 11?

Sadly, it means that no group of Catholics in America are being denied more information about clergy sex crimes and cover-ups than the roughly 1.6 million parishioners in the Bay Area and surrounding counties.

In large part, again, that's the church hierarchy's intent: These church officials are in bankruptcy court not because they're financially bankrupt, but because they're morally bankrupt. Bishops claim they need to protect church assets. But they're primarily concerned with protecting church secrets.

For decades, these officials, their predecessors and their clerics have committed, ignored or concealed thousands of heinous crimes against children. And now, they're going to extreme lengths to keep those crimes hidden even longer.

By exploiting federal laws and blocking abuse cases, bishops keep information about proven, admitted and credibly accused child molesting clerics under their control. Quite simply, they are keeping kids at risk of abuse right now.

**This story has been updated with the correct location of the Hanna Boys Center.*

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