News



Bishop John Barres of Rockville Centre, New York, delivers the homily during Mass at St. Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre on June 29, 2020. A federal judge confirmed Dec. 4, 2024, a plan that resolves and ends the bankruptcy case for the Rockville Centre Diocese, with a total settlement amount at just over $323 million for abuse claimants. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Sean Piccoli

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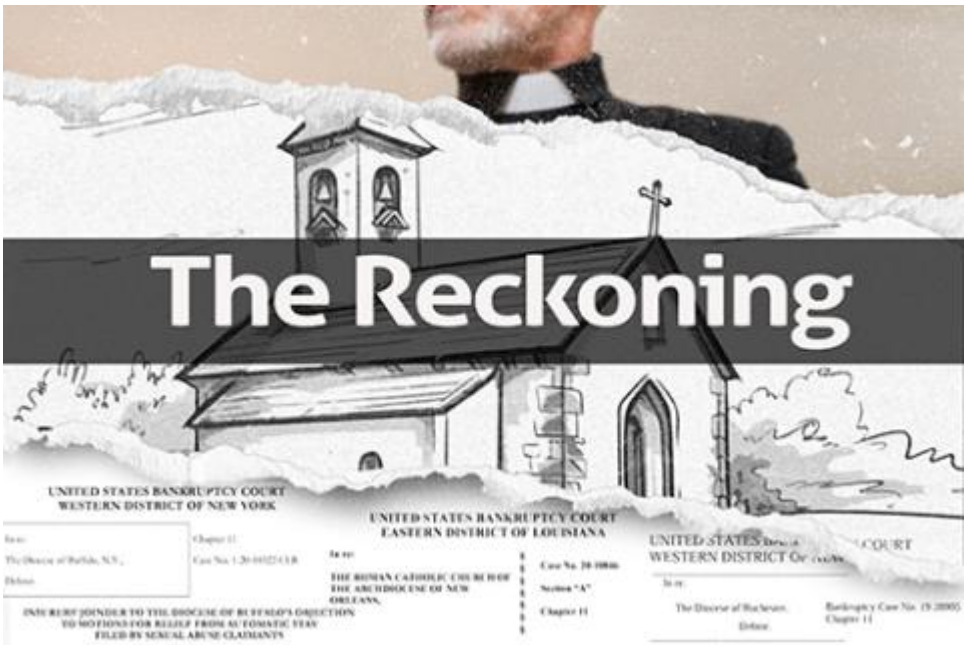
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Rockville Centre, N.Y. — January 15, 2025
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Editor's note: *The Catholic Church has spent billions of dollars settling claims from sexual abuse cases. National Catholic Reporter first exposed the abuse scandal in stories first reported 40 years ago. This year, NCR is investigating the costs to Catholics, parishes and the church in its new series "The Reckoning."*

This is the first of a two-part story on the sexual abuse settlement in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York. Part 2 provides reaction to the settlement from survivors of sexual abuse in Rockville Centre.

Some Roman Catholic parishes on New York's Long Island were compelled to pay more than $1 million, while others ponied up five figures. But every parish had to pay.



(NCR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

That's the news that emerged over the past few months from parishes that were swept into the bankruptcy proceedings of the Diocese of Rockville Centre. Parishes were tapped to help secure an approximately $323 million settlement of decades-old sexual abuse claims by some 600 survivors, according to a National Catholic Reporter examination of parish bulletins and announcements.

Parishes paid a total of $53 million toward the settlement, and every one of the 136 parishes belonging to the diocese filed for bankruptcy and contributed, whether or not they were being sued, a spokesman for the diocese told the National Catholic Reporter. The move was greeted with dismay at most parishes.

"If anyone is upset, so am I," Fr. Christopher Sullivan wrote to his parishioners in Hicksville, New York.

Your help with 'The Reckoning'

If you have any tips, leads, suggestions or information about the costs of the sexual abuse scandal on Catholics, orders, parishes, communities, dioceses or the church, please email ncr_editor@ncronline.org with the subject line "The Reckoning."

The total payout from all of the Rockville Centre parishes was provided by the diocese in response to an inquiry from the National Catholic Reporter. It's one piece of a bankruptcy settlement that took four years to reach, following claims that scores of priests and other adults who worked for the diocese from the 1950s onward abused children in their care. The $323 million designated for abuse victims is in addition to legal fees for all parties in the case that have exceeded $100 million.

The Catholic Church in the United States has now spent billions of dollars in payouts and legal fees to settle claims arising from sexual abuse cases that stretch back decades — abuses that first came to light some 40 years ago with reporting in the National Catholic Reporter.

Since then, dioceses in every region of the country have paid millions in civil damages for the behavior of predatory priests and church leaders accused of covering up abuse scandals. Or they've sought protection under the U.S. bankruptcy code to limit the financial fallout. In Rockville Centre, that strategy has come at a cost even to individual parishes with no connections to past abuses.



Suzanne Emerson, from Silver Spring, Maryland, holds a sign during a Nov. 12, 2018, news conference held by Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops met in Baltimore for the annual fall general assembly. The growing abuse crisis facing the U.S. church in 2018 topped the meeting agenda. (CNS/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)

About 30 parishes that were not facing litigation joined the rest in bankruptcy and thus contributed to the diocese's payout, the spokesman said. "They also participated so that all parishes could emerge from this case together," he said in an email.

No parishes are closing as a result of the settlement, the diocesan spokesman said. But parishes large and small are feeling its effects.

Sullivan's Holy Family Parish in Hicksville paid $180,000, drawn from a maintenance reserve fund, he wrote in a November bulletin to parishioners. "Even though I was not alive in the 1950s and 60s, I still get yelled at by strangers in the street because

I dress the way I dress," Sullivan said, referring to his clerical clothes. "If anyone needs someone to yell at or vent at, my door is open."

In October, after an initial bankruptcy settlement agreement was reached, Catholics on Long Island began learning in piecemeal fashion from their pastors how much would come out of parish coffers to help close out litigation over past abuse claims — often referred to as "historic litigation" in case parlance. The settlement will pay civil claims for sexual abuses that occurred before the diocese sought Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in October 2020.

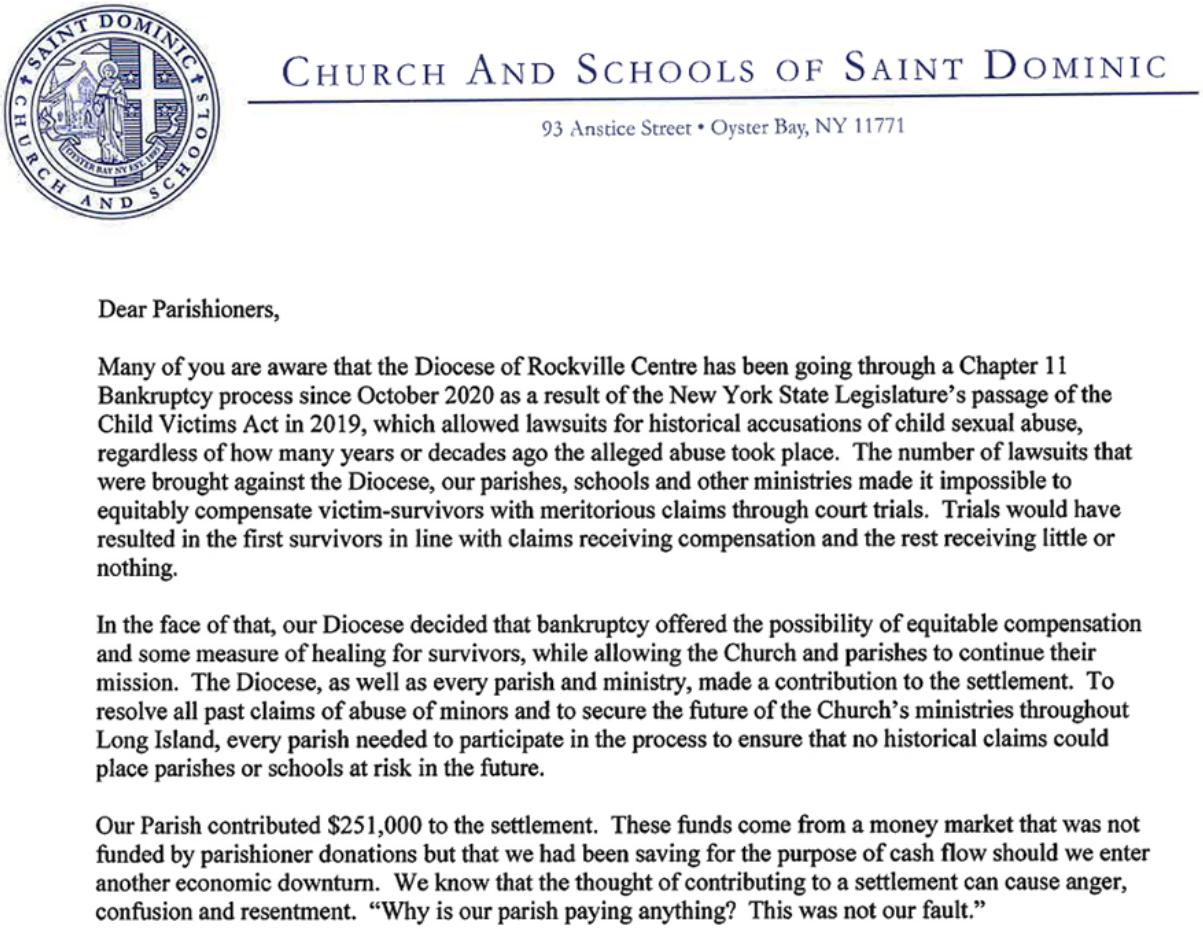
Like Sullivan, pastors notified parishioners in weekly church bulletins and at Sunday Masses, seeking to address and perhaps ease potential anger at the thought of church donations funding compensation for abuses that took place decades ago, whether or not a parish was directly tied to past incidents of abuse.

> 'We know that the thought of our Parish contributing to a settlement can cause anger, confusion, and resentment.'
>
> —Fr. Gerard Gordon, pastor of St. Martin of Tours in Amityville, New York, writing in the parish bulletin
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'Shocking and overwhelming'

St. Martin of Tours in Amityville, paid $330,002 from reserve and investment funds. Writing in the parish bulletin, pastor Fr. Gerard Gordon said, "We know that the thought of our Parish contributing to a settlement can cause anger, confusion, and resentment. 'Why is our parish paying anything? This was not our fault.' "

That wording is nearly identical to a letter from Msgr. Thomas Coogan, pastor of the Church of St. Dominic in Oyster Bay, New York, which contributed $251,000.



CHURCH AND SCHOOLS OF SAINT DOMINIC

93 Anstice Street • Oyster Bay, NY 11771

Dear Parishioners,

Many of you are aware that the Diocese of Rockville Centre has been going through a Chapter 11 Bankruptcy process since October 2020 as a result of the New York State Legislature's passage of the Child Victims Act in 2019, which allowed lawsuits for historical accusations of child sexual abuse, regardless of how many years or decades ago the alleged abuse took place. The number of lawsuits that were brought against the Diocese, our parishes, schools and other ministries made it impossible to equitably compensate victim-survivors with meritorious claims through court trials. Trials would have resulted in the first survivors in line with claims receiving compensation and the rest receiving little or nothing.

In the face of that, our Diocese decided that bankruptcy offered the possibility of equitable compensation and some measure of healing for survivors, while allowing the Church and parishes to continue their mission. The Diocese, as well as every parish and ministry, made a contribution to the settlement. To resolve all past claims of abuse of minors and to secure the future of the Church's ministries throughout Long Island, every parish needed to participate in the process to ensure that no historical claims could place parishes or schools at risk in the future.

Our Parish contributed $251,000 to the settlement. These funds come from a money market that was not funded by parishioner donations but that we had been saving for the purpose of cash flow should we enter another economic downturn. We know that the thought of contributing to a settlement can cause anger, confusion and resentment. "Why is our parish paying anything? This was not our fault."

A letter to parishioners from Msgr. Thomas Coogan, pastor of the Church of St. Dominic in Oyster Bay, New York, is pictured in this screengrab. A link to read the full letter is below. (NCR screengrab/Courtesy of John Salveson)

John Salveson, who said he was repeatedly abused by a St. Dominic parish priest, Fr. Robert Huneke, beginning in 1969, called the "not our fault" assertion "offensive" and "tone deaf."

Salveson, who now lives in Pennsylvania, did not participate in the bankruptcy; he received compensation from the Rockville Centre Diocese through an earlier process, the Independent Reconciliation and Compensation Program, in 2017. But he followed the bankruptcy case, and took exception to some of the sentiments from pastors that surfaced in the bulletins.

"Do you have to have been in the room to be responsible?" Salveson said. "Where's your sense of any responsibility for the institution that's done this?"

Read full document:
Document

Letter to Church of St. Dominic parishioners.pdf

For Notre Dame Parish in New Hyde Park, the amount was $1,327,480 drawn from investment income — "a very large amount" but "far less than the money it would cost to litigate the three historic cases filed against the parish," Fr. John J. McCartney wrote to parishioners.

"But, most especially, Notre Dame's contribution has purchased for us something far more valuable: immunity from all future historic lawsuits," McCartney wrote.

The diocesan spokesman said the settlement protects all the parishes from new litigation in the event that New York lawmakers decide to revisit the state's 2019 Child Victims Act and open another so-called "look-back window," in which the statute of limitations on civil lawsuits for past sexual abuse claims is temporarily waived.

Scores of claims against the Rockville Centre Diocese followed the law's passage, and soon after the diocese declared bankruptcy.

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Pastors took pains to assure parishioners that the payments would not harm the parish's ability to function. "No money was taken from the school account," Sullivan of Holy Family wrote.

"None of the payments being made for the child abuse cases comes from recent collections," Fr. Robert Romeo, pastor of the Church of St. Mary in Manhasset, wrote in a weekly bulletin disclosing a payment of almost $4.5 million from its investment funds to settle 10 historic abuse lawsuits against the parish.

"This amount is, at first glance, shocking and overwhelming (as it is to me)," Romeo wrote, explaining the figure was "based on the number of cases against the parish and the wealth of the parish. If we were to litigate these cases separately and on our own, it could have a much larger and devastating financial effect on our ability to continue the mission of the Church."

Romeo cast the payment as an act of contrition. "Those who seek to carry on the mission of service, along with those they serve, bear the burdens of the sins of the

past," he wrote. "In this time, the Church and society in general have finally been forced to recognize the pain abuse victims have suffered."

Completing bankruptcy also represents "a fresh start" for the parishes even as some will have to adjust to their payouts by finding ways to cut expenses, said Marie T. Reilly, a law professor at Penn State University who studies U.S. Catholic Church bankruptcies.

"It's hard to know what those sacrifices are," Reilly said. "But the assurance is that this is over, and I think that is an outcome that is very important to people."

'Resolution and conclusion'

On Dec. 8, the second Sunday of Advent, Bishop John Barres, head of the diocese, celebrated Mass at the Cathedral of St. Agnes, a Gothic tower of a building that rises along a busy commuter rail line connecting New York City and the Long Island suburbs.

A spiritual leader for more than a million Long Island Catholics, Barres opened the Mass by heralding Advent as a celebration of Christ's birth and return and noting its importance as a call to "repentance, conversion and vigilance."

He then turned to the bankruptcy. "We are grateful to God for the announcement this past week of the final resolution and conclusion of the bankruptcy case for our diocese and for all our parishes," Barres said. "In a special way," he continued, "we pray for all survivors of sexual abuse and their families, that they may find some measure of healing and peace."



St. Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre, New York, is seen Jan. 1, 2024. A federal judge confirmed Dec. 4, 2024, a plan that resolves and ends the bankruptcy case for the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York, with a total settlement amount at just over $323 million for abuse claimants. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

By then, most St. Agnes parishioners likely knew of the settlement, which concluded a turbulent four years of negotiations that nearly collapsed as both sides rejected previous offers and vented their disagreements in the media. As recently as May, the diocese moved to scrap bankruptcy proceedings entirely.

Now, payments are expected to begin reaching abuse survivors in 2025 under the court-approved plan announced on Dec. 4, with a retired judge, William L. Bettinelli, appointed by the bankruptcy judge to review each individual claim and assign it a dollar value.

Rockville Centre was one of six New York dioceses — including Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo and Ogdensburg — to declare bankruptcy after the state passed

the Child Victims Act, which beginning in 2019 temporarily allowed decades-old sex abuse claims to be pursued in court. Rockville Centre is the first of the six New York dioceses to emerge from bankruptcy. Its settlement, though the largest for a U.S. diocese in bankruptcy, is less than half of the $880 million the Archdiocese of Los Angeles agreed in October to pay to more than 1,300 abuse victims.

The Los Angeles Archdiocese, which has agreed to pay out over $1.5 billion in total, has not turned to the bankruptcy courts. The Rockville Centre Diocese will be immune from civil claims for incidents of sexual abuse that occurred before the diocese sought Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2020, according to the parties in the case. The 136 individual parishes and their employees are immune from civil claims for incidents of sexual abuse that occurred before Dec. 3, 2024, the date every parish filed for bankruptcy under an abbreviated process approved by the judge overseeing the case, Martin Glenn of the Southern District of New York.



PJ D'Amico, 57, is one of about 600 survivors of sexual abuse in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York, who will receive financial compensation from the diocese through a financial settlement. D'Amico spoke to NCR about the settlement

in the second part of this story. (Courtesy of PJ D'Amico)

"In the end," the diocesan spokesman said, "this was the only way to equitably compensate survivors and allow the church to continue her mission."

The diocese, and some parishioners, described the end of the process as a much-needed reset after a dark chapter that echoed abuse scandals at other U.S. dioceses. Barres spoke at St. Agnes of "a renewed enthusiasm for the evangelizing mission of church" heading into its Jubilee Year of 2025.

"With everything washed away, it feels really good," Gregoire Francois Jocelyn Jr. said outside St. Agnes after a recent Sunday afternoon Mass. Jocelyn, a physician who serves as an usher at St. Agnes, said the diocese can now refocus on pressing community needs including spiritual and material care for Long Island's growing migrant population.

NCR's investigative reports, including this series, are made possible in part through the generosity of Annette Lomont.

Related: Clergy abuse survivors react to New York diocese's bankruptcy settlement
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