News



St. Francis Xavier Cathedral in Alexandria, Louisiana in 2014. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. (Wikimedia Commons/Farragutful/CC BY-SA 3.0)



by Sean Piccoli

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

November 6, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The rural Diocese of Alexandria, Louisiana filed for bankruptcy in federal court to begin the process of settling dozens of child sexual abuse allegations against priests who served in the state's sparsely populated interior.

The Oct. 31 filing came a day after hundreds of clergy abuse victims voted to approve a $230 million bankruptcy agreement with the larger Archdiocese of New Orleans. Alexandria is the second of Louisiana's seven dioceses to seek Chapter 11 protection under U.S. bankruptcy laws.

"We are at this moment for one reason: some priests sexually abused minors," Bishop Robert W. Marshall, Jr., shepherd of the Alexandria Diocese since 2020, wrote in a letter apologizing to both parishioners and abuse survivors.

The diocese has identified more than 30 former priests and deacons it believes were credibly accused of committing sexual abuse in previous decades. The diocese said that 85 people have come forward with abuse claims, and "we expect that number to rise" as the bankruptcy case moves forward, according to a frequently asked questions section of the diocese's website.



St. Louis Cathedral and a statue of Andrew Jackson are seen June 3, 2019, in New Orleans. The Archdiocese of New Orleans said in a court filing Oct. 30, 2025, that its $230 million bankruptcy settlement was approved by 99.63% of sexual abuse victims and other creditors in advance of a midnight deadline that same day. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

In 2024, Louisiana extended a so-called "lookback" measure from 2021 that set aside the statutory deadline for pursuing sexual abuse claims in the state's civil courts, giving victims until June 14, 2027 to file lawsuits. The diocese's bankruptcy petition lists 37 sexual abuse lawsuits against the diocese.

Under federal law, existing claims and any future claims against the Alexandria Diocese would be redirected into bankruptcy proceedings and the diocese would be allowed to continue operating local churches, schools and social services while negotiating payouts to abuse survivors.

"Our hope is that the diocese can reach a global settlement with those who have claims in the very near future," Marshall wrote. "We have already been in negotiations for some months" with plaintiff lawyers, he added.

Julien Lamothe, a lawyer representing two plaintiffs against the diocese, confirmed the existence of "pre-bankruptcy" negotiations aimed at a speedier resolution of the case. "The survivors have been waiting a long time for some kind of closure, and it's in everybody's interest to get this done sooner," he told National Catholic Reporter.

Lamothe compared the Alexandria settlement case to another settlement in the Archdiocese of New Orleans, which took more than five years to reach a vote in late October and resulted in $50 million in attorney's fees. "I don't know that Alexandria has that luxury," Lamothe said. "They're a poor diocese."

The diocese has said as much in its communications to parishioners and initial filings in U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Western District of Louisiana. It claims $16.7 million in assets, $9.5 million in liabilities and $4 million plus insurance money to put toward victim compensation.

"Despite its long history of service, the Diocese is designated as a 'Mission Diocese,' meaning it cannot provide basic pastoral services without outside financial assistance," lawyers wrote in a motion seeking permission to continue paying

diocese staff salaries. "The Diocese has operated at a loss for years, and it serves a largely rural and economically disadvantaged population."



Bishop Robert W. Marshall Jr. of Alexandria, La., is pictured in an undated file photo. The Diocese of Alexandria filed for Chapter 11 reorganization Oct. 31 to address dozens of abuse claims, the total number of which may rise under that state's extended "lookback law," the diocese said. (OSV News/courtesy Catholic Diocese of Memphis)

The diocese counts 36,000 Catholics within its jurisdiction — a shrinking number, based on past census counts, in a predominantly Baptist region. They are spread across 13 counties, known as civil "parishes" in Louisiana, which encompass more than 11,000 square miles, according to the diocese. Inside its boundaries are more than 70 parish and mission churches, nine Catholic schools, including one for people with developmental disabilities, a hospital, a soup kitchen and a 186-acre spiritual retreat facility.

Marshall stressed in his letter to parishioners that the bankruptcy "only applies only to the diocese itself" because the parish churches and other facilities, with the exception of the 186-acre campus owned by the diocese, are separately incorporated under state law "and are not affected by this filing."

More than 40 of the U.S. Catholic Church's 194 dioceses and archdioceses have entered or completed bankruptcy proceedings in the wake of abuse allegations, according to a database of diocesan bankruptcies kept by Penn State University. The total settlement amount has climbed into the billions of dollars, with several cases still unresolved.

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the largest in the U.S., agreed in 2024 to pay more than $880 million to more than 1,300 abuse survivors, on top of prior settlements by the archdiocese of more than $600 million. The Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y. reached a $323 million settlement in 2024 with about 600 victims of past clergy abuse.

The Diocese of Alexandria has maintained, since 2019, a list of suspect priests, many of whom were removed from ministry and in some cases defrocked. All but three of the 32 priests or deacons on the list have died, and none of the three accused men who are still believed to be alive are practicing ministry in the Catholic Church, the diocese said.

The abuse claims that appear in the list of accused clergy date back as far as 1945 and reach into the 2000s.

Diocesan leaders in the 1960s knew that one priest on the list, Fr. Leo Van Hoorn, was a serial rapist and abuser of young boys, according to a lawsuit filed in state court in 2020. But instead of warning parishioners or turning Van Hoorn over to the authorities, they shuffled him from parish to parish, the lawsuit alleges.

The plaintiff in that case, using the pseudonym "Lou Doe," said in court papers that he was a child in a Catholic elementary school in Pineville, La., in the 1960s when Van Hoorn, a teacher at the school and a frequent overnight guest at the family's house, would come into his bedroom and masturbate in front of him. Van Hoorn was quietly removed from active ministry in 1979 but was allowed to retire as a priest. He died in 2006.

Another plaintiff in state court alleges that a priest on the list, Fr. Edmund Gagné, abused him in the 1970s while he was an altar boy at a church in Alexandria, Louisiana, according to a report from a local television news station.

The accuser, who filed suit in 2024, said that Gagné took him to Mexico on what was presented as a mission trip and sexually assaulted him in a hotel room, after which the alleged victim said he fled the country, buying a plane ticket and flying home alone. Gagné was removed from public ministry in 1986 and died in 1990, according to the diocese.

Advertisement

"As a church, we bear the shame of this scandal," Marshall said in a video posted on the diocesan website Nov. 1. But that burden will no longer include victims testifying in open court in front of a judge or jury.

The bishop said the diocese's goal in seeking to reorganize under Chapter 11 is twofold: "First, a reorganization will ensure that we do as much as possible, as fairly as possible, to compensate those who have been harmed and who have unresolved claims, ensuring that all are treated equitably.

"Second, the reorganization will allow the essential functions of the diocese to continue in order to meet the basic needs of our parishes and parishioners, sustain other critical ministries and ultimately allow us to move forward on stable financial footing, fulfill the spiritual, pastoral, educational and charitable mission of the church."

He also expressed gratitude to "the survivors who have come forward to right a wrong and demonstrate the far-reaching and lingering impact of the evil actions of a few. The survivors are the courageous ones and the reason we are a different and better church today."

A spokesperson for the diocese declined to comment and referred NCR to the bishop's letter and the video statement.