News



Archbishop Gregory Aymond, of New Orleans, listens during a news conference at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' annual fall meeting in Baltimore, Nov. 12, 2013. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky, File)

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The New Orleans Archdiocese will pay at least $230 million to hundreds of victims of clergy sexual abuse under a settlement approved Dec. 8 by a federal judge that follows years of negotiations.

Richard Trahant, an attorney representing victims in the case, and a spokesperson for the archdiocese both confirmed approval of the settlement to The Associated Press by U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Meredith Grabill.

Archbishop Gregory Aymond, the head of the archdiocese, told reporters outside of a federal courthouse on Monday that he's pleased "this is the end of this process" and hopes that survivors will "find some closure."

"We hope and pray that they will be able to not only receive what is given to them but they will know the healing of God's love," Aymond said.

Earlier this month, some of the survivors behind the more than 500 abuse claims testified in court, saying they are still affected decades later by the painful memories they shared publicly.

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The archdiocese had filed for bankruptcy in May 2020 rather than handle each abuse claim separately. Survivors noted that doing so enabled church leadership to avoid tougher questions they would have to face in court.

Some recalled battling substance abuse, struggling with intimacy and wondering whether they themselves were to blame for what happened. Some said they forgave the church, while others could not.

In her testimony, Kathleen Austin recalled being abused hundreds of times as a child and watching the perpetrator continue in a role within the Catholic Church even after its leadership knew what he was doing. She expressed skepticism that the church would hold clergy accountable in the future given how much she said it resisted responding to her experiences.

"Why has it taken so long to get to this point and at such a high cost?" she asked.

The Associated Press doesn't generally identify people who are victims of sexual abuse unless they come forward publicly, such as those who testified in New Orleans.

Aymond, who is handing church leadership to a successor, listened to the survivors' testimony last week.

"I also apologize for the church, that I'm embarrassed by what has happened in the church," Aymond told reporters afterward.

Chris Naquin testified that his abuse began when he was 4 years old and that he cycled through decades of mental institutions and prisons.

"I don't think I will ever, ever get over it. There's no amount of money in the world," Naquin said as he teared up. "I never had a childhood and I'm just now starting my adult life at 56 years old."

Billy Cheramie, who said he felt he died the day he was abused as a little boy, told the archdiocese he forgave it for what he went through. He said God later helped him realize the abuse he suffered was not his fault, thus allowing him to release some of the anger that had propelled him to join the U.S. military to learn how to kill.

"Killing did not fix the pain and the memories," he said.

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Neil Duhon testified that he still struggles with the idea of forgiveness.

"This legal thing will maybe end but what it has done to us, the trauma it has done to us, will not ever end," Duhon told the court, saying his perpetrator, former priest Lawrence Hecker, received a life sentence after pleading guilty to charges including rape and aggravated kidnapping.

Aymond, 75, had long resisted calls to resign from survivors who said the church did not take action against credibly accused perpetrators. The accusations of clergy abuse triggered a sweeping FBI probe and a cascading crisis for the Catholic Church, which drew on help from New Orleans Saints executives to help behind the scenes with damage control, an AP investigation revealed.

The finalized settlement plan, which received overwhelming approval by survivors during a vote in October, includes policies intended to prevent abuse from occurring in the future.

A survivor will have a seat on the archdiocese's internal review board that handles claims of sexual abuse. An outside expert is to monitor the church's child abuse prevention practices. The church also is adopting a survivors' bill of rights and survivors will have a direct line of communication to the archbishop to direct complaints of misconduct. And a public archive will be established to share long withheld documents related to abuse claims.

In September, Pope Leo XIV named Bishop James Checchio, of the diocese of Metuchen, New Jersey, as coadjutor archbishop of New Orleans in line to succeed Aymond when he retires. A spokesperson for Aymond said on Monday that there is no confirmed timeline for the archbishop's retirement.

Associated Press writer Sara Cline contributed to this report from Baton Rouge, Louisiana.