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Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis, Missouri, Oct. 2009 (Flickr/Chris Yunker)

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The Archdiocese of St. Louis filed a Dec. 23 motion seeking to have several counts dismissed in a lawsuit alleging "decades" of sexual abuse against minors by clergy, men and women religious, archdiocesan employees and other affiliated persons.

Judge Christopher McGraugh of the 22nd Judicial Court in St. Louis has granted a request to continue the case until March 26, with his order noting that "the parties are in the early stages of discovery."

OSV News is awaiting a response to its request for comment from the Archdiocese of St. Louis.

The initial suit was brought in July 2024 by 25 plaintiffs, identified only by their initials, who were all minor residents of Missouri at the time of the alleged abuse.

Named as defendants in that suit were the Archdiocese of St. Louis, Archbishop Mitchell Rozanski and "John Doe I," identified as a priest known as "Fr. Joe" who served at St. Ambrose Catholic Church in St. Louis.

Several of the plaintiffs indicated that they expected to learn the true identity of their abusers — often recalled only by first or religious names — during the case's discovery phase.

The suit specified that Rozanski was sued "solely in his capacity as an officer, director and/or chief executive officer of the Archdiocese of St. Louis," with the term "Archbishop" in court documents encompassing "all Archbishops who officially supervised or failed to supervise the employee abusers set forth herein."

The suit, containing graphic descriptions of alleged abuse that extended from the 1950s past 2010, listed 10 charges for redress that included childhood sexual abuse, intentional failure to supervise clergy, negligence, fraud, aiding and abetting, and intentional infliction of emotional harm.

But on Dec. 23, the Archdiocese of St. Louis filed a motion to dismiss several of those charges, challenging the merits of "a wholly unprecedented case" that collated multiple legal actions without specifically assigning blame to the alleged perpetrators.

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"Twenty-five Plaintiffs assert ten separate causes of action arising from childhood sexual abuse allegedly committed by approximately twenty-five individuals, many of which are unknown to the Plaintiffs, spanning over sixty-eight years — yet not one of the alleged perpetrators is a defendant here," said the archdiocese in its filing. "Instead, Plaintiffs sued the Archdiocese and Archbishop Rozanski, who did not even assume his role until a decade after the last alleged incident."

Citing Missouri law and case precedents, the archdiocese asked the court to dismiss the charges of childhood sexual abuse; negligent failure to supervise children and report sexual abuse, and negligence per se; breach of special relationship or duty; fraud, constructive fraud and conspiracy to commit fraud; intentional infliction of emotional distress; and aiding and abetting.

In particular, said the archdiocese in its motion, "Missouri courts have long held that claims for childhood sexual abuse cannot be brought against nonperpetrators."

The archdiocese also argued that "negligence-based or special-relationship claims against religious institutions are constitutionally barred" by Missouri, and that the state's court had "repeatedly rejected" efforts to "reframe nonperpetrator liability as 'aiding and abetting' abuse."

The archdiocesan motion said the lawsuit asserted "negligence-based claims and fiduciary duty-based theories that Missouri courts have consistently held cannot be applied to religious institutions without violating the First Amendment.

"Each of these claims requires the Court to evaluate how the Archdiocese should have supervised clergy or church personnel, managed internal policies, protected parishioners, or disclosed information regarding ministerial assignments — all of which are matters off-limits to civil courts," said the filing.