

Bridgeport diocese unseals 12,600 pages of court documents

NCR Staff | Dec. 2, 2009



Cardinal Edward Egan (CNS photo)

After years of legal wrangling and after unsuccessfully taking its argument all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, on Dec. 1 the Bridgeport, Conn., diocese unsealed nearly 12,600 pages of documents dealing with three decades of child molestation accusations against diocesan priests.

The files, including a deposition of then Bishop Edward Egan, the recently retired cardinal of New York, were part of lawsuits filed against six priests in the Bridgeport diocese, five of whom were eventually banned from ministry and one who died. The lawsuits were settled in 2001.

The diocese, which covers some of the wealthiest towns in the country as well as Bridgeport, Connecticut's largest city, has paid nearly \$38 million over the years to settle abuse claims involving allegations by more than 60 people who said they had been molested by priests.

Jason Tremont, one of the attorneys for the clergy abuse victims, said the documents "confirm the mishandling and cover-up of sex abuse claims" by Egan and his predecessor, Bishop Walter Curtis.

"I believe that Bishop Egan was aware " when he took over and during his tenure " of these complaints, yet in some circumstances let the priests continue and was very aggressive in his defending of these cases and revictimizing the victims," Tremont said.

The New York archdiocese responded, saying that that Egan had "aggressively investigated" all allegations of abuse.

Following the release of the documents, press reports portrayed Egan as defensive, evasive and sometimes argumentative when questioned about his role investigating complaints of sexual misconduct by priests in his diocese.

While Egan claimed to be proud of the "excellent" written policy he helped establish as Bridgeport's bishop, he also appeared complicit in a policy of disinformation concerning the practice of abruptly reassigning priests accused of sexual abuse, one report stated. The explanation for a priest's new assignment, if a public one was offered at all, often involved a feigned medical problem, one document indicated.

If anyone were to ask, I would simply say they probably had no business to ask and I would just avoid the answer," Egan said under questioning in a deposition in October 1997.

One document connected to a victim in Westport reads, "During the summer of either 1978 or 1979, another boy and I traveled to Block Island, Rhode Island, with Father [Joseph] Moore. That night, the other boy and I literally jumped out of a bedroom window to escape Father Moore's sexual advances." In the document the victim goes on to say, "I was never offered counseling services by the diocese of Bridgeport or any of its representatives."

The documents also included an affidavit in which one priest testified as an expert in a case saying, "The diocese's system of reviewing complaints of clergy sexual abuse was negligent and inconsistent."

The battle for the release of the documents began seven years ago after four media agencies sued the diocese to release documents. The Hartford Courant, The Washington Post, The Boston Globe and The New York Times all sought state and federal courts to make the material public.

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