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Churchgoers' help sought in abuse payouts

The San Diego Diocese's request for donations to defray settlement costs divides parishioners. Priests are also asked to give and say they will.

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OCEANSIDE -- Bishop Robert Brom of the San Diego Diocese is asking priests and parishioners to dig into their pocketbooks to help pay a \$198-million settlement for the victims of clergy abuse - a request that has drawn a pledge of solidarity from many priests but a negative response from some congregants.

He made his unusual request last week to the several hundred priests in the Roman Catholic diocese, which includes San Diego and Imperial counties, that he heads.

"We're in solidarity," the Rev. Ray Elam, associate pastor at St. Mary Star of the Sea in Oceanside, said Sunday at one of the largest and most prominent churches in the diocese.

But there was no solidarity Sunday at St. Mary about Brom's other request: that churchgoers give "generously" to help pay for the sins of predatory priests.

"Honestly, I don't think people should have to pay," said Joe Anthony, 46, a carpenter and St. Mary regular. "They should go to Rome; that's where the money is."

Michael Cafarchia, 75, a retired executive, agreed.

"It's not right to ask the parishioners to pay, not after the way the hierarchy covered up these crimes for years," he said. "The church has plenty of property to sell."

Nile Holmes, 76, a truck driver, said the answer to the sexual abuse scandal lies in jail sentences, not a monetary settlement. "Why aren't they putting some people in jail over this?" he asked as he approached the church steps.

The discontent among parishioners isn't confined to just one church.

Vicki Sheridan, who helps run the Bible study group at Sacred Heart Church in Coronado, said she was impressed that priests were willing to contribute a month's salary. Though she thought the request from the diocese was reasonable, she said she wasn't inclined to donate.

"The people who are actually culpable, a lot of them are dead, and among the rest of us, nobody has any more culpability than anyone else," said Sheridan, a homemaker. "But I do think the Vatican can sell a painting or two. That would pay for it."

Still, some said they would gladly support Brom.

"This is our church and we love it," said Marie English, 76, a member at St. Mary. "If the church needs help, how can we deny it? Sometimes you have to pay for problems you didn't cause -- that's life. Let's pay and move on."

Brom has asked parish priests in the diocese's 99 churches to take his request to their congregants. Fundraising letters in English, Spanish and Vietnamese are to be sent out later this month.

The priests seem in lockstep with their bishop. Indeed, the idea of forgoing a month's salary was made by an advisory committee to the bishop.

Elam said he and other priests agreed with the Rev. Ned Brockhaus, pastor of St. John of the Cross in Lemon Grove, who said recently that "It's a way of kind of righting some of the injustices done . . . and also starting the healing process."

Charles Zech, director of the Center for the Study of Church Management and an economist at Villanova University in Philadelphia, said he believed this was the first time a diocese had asked priests and parishioners directly to contribute to the cost of a clergy abuse legal settlement. He said the closest equivalent action would be requests by dioceses in the Spokane, Wash., and Tucson areas for their parishes to contribute to settlement costs.

Zech said he considered it fair to ask priests and parishioners to contribute to the settlement, but only if any contributions were truly voluntary.

He added that contributions by priests would add "credibility" to the fundraising effort. Zech said it would be "a wonderful example" for parishioners "if a pastor would stand before his congregation on Sunday and say, 'We've got this appeal, and I'm contributing, and I urge you to.' "

What's more, Zech said, "It would be hard for a priest to ask his parishioners to contribute if he himself is not contributing."

Zech said, however, that many parishioners would be likely to balk at contributing to the settlement fund. He said a nationwide survey that he oversaw in 2005 of 1,000 U.S. Catholics found that 44% indicated they would consider it "acceptable" to pay for financial settlements resulting from sexual abuse by priests with "a special diocesan-wide collection."

The other 56% polled, he said, either opposed the idea or were undecided. But Zech said the percentage of parishioners opposed to such a contribution was likely to be even higher now that the idea is no longer a hypothetical matter.

For church officials, selling the idea "is going to be a challenge," Zech said.

Lawyers and others involved in the litigation that resulted in last month's settlement seemed puzzled by Brom's request.

San Diego attorney Irwin Zalkin, who represented 30 of the San Diego claimants, said he found

Brom's appeal odd given the diocese's large real estate holdings and the \$165 million a year it gets from the collection plate and other donations.

"He has more than enough real estate to cover the diocese share of the settlement," which is \$77,071,350, Zalkin said. "I think he's just trying to get a buy-in from the priests and the laity, to make them feel part of the problem."

In February, the San Diego Diocese became the fifth, and largest, in the country to file for protection in bankruptcy court in the face of lawsuits claiming sexual abuse by priests.

But the bankruptcy judge was skeptical that the diocese, with more than 1 million parishioners, was actually facing bankruptcy. The judge instead suggested that Brom was "forum shopping," hoping that by filing for bankruptcy, any monetary settlement to abuse victims would be less than if the cases went to trial.

In September, after the judge said 42 cases could go to trial, the diocese agreed to pay \$198.1 million to 144 victims. The settlement was second only to that of the Los Angeles Archdiocese, which has paid out \$764 million since the church abuse scandal erupted nationwide in 2002.

When announcing the settlement, Brom said the bankruptcy filing had been a failure and that the settlement would lead to "some damaging consequences for the mission of the church" for years.

Under the settlement, the diocese's insurance carrier agreed to pay \$75,650,000. Other religious orders will pay \$30,269,098, and the San Bernardino Diocese, which was part of the San Diego Diocese until 1978, will pay \$15,134,552.

The diocese has 118 of its own priests, as well as 74 from other dioceses and 84 from religious orders. The diocesan priests make between \$1,500 and \$1,600 a month. If all of them agreed to donate a month's wages, it would only come to about \$200,000, Zalkin noted.

Paul Livingston, San Diego director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, said he believes Brom may be having difficulty conceding that the position the diocese took during the bankruptcy petition -- that it could be left bankrupt -- was false.

"I think he's just trying to save face," Livingston said. "He can't come out after months of pretending the diocese is broke and say it wasn't, it was all a charade."

Church officials have said the diocese's share of the settlement will be paid through real estate sales, loans, stock holdings and cash.

No decision has been announced about the possible sale of the church administrative headquarters.

The Los Angeles Archdiocese has said 50 nonparish properties, including the administrative headquarters on Wilshire Boulevard, will be sold to help pay its settlement. The Sisters of Bethany convent in Santa Barbara is also being sold to help pay.

Ryan Lilyengren, a spokesman for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange, said no similar appeal would be directed at priests and parishioners there. He said the diocese's insurance and existing treasury funds should be able to cover all or nearly all of the \$100-million settlement reached in 2004 to settle 87 abuse claims.

Officials with the Los Angeles Archdiocese could not be reached for comment.

The San Diego settlement calls for documents naming the priests and detailing the abuse incidents to be made public, although lawyers have yet to determine a method for such disclosure.

In March, soon after filing for Chapter 11 protection, Brom released the names of 38 priests against whom "credible allegations" had been made. None are still employed by the diocese.

Most of the priests had served in parishes in San Diego. But a few had been in parishes in the suburbs north of San Diego, including two at St. Mary: one in 1977-78 and one in 1991-92, according to information posted on the diocese website.

Built in 1928, St. Mary is one of the diocese's oldest churches. Its Masses, conducted in Spanish and English, are standing-room only. Although most of the parishioners come from Oceanside, others drive from communities as far away as Temecula.

The sermon Sunday was about displaying charity toward the poor.

"Be kind to others," the Rev. Jim Frye, subbing for the regular pastor, told parishioners at the 10:30 a.m. Mass. "If you do that, you'll please Almighty God."

When the collection baskets were passed, parishioners put in checks and cash to help with church expenses and its programs for the poor in downtown Oceanside.

But the issue of paying for the sex-abuse settlement enjoyed no such unanimity as parishioners left the church for the morning sunshine.

"I'm ready to help, any way I can," said Rita Valverde, who is in her 50s. "The parishioners are the church, and it's our responsibility."

For others, there was no easy or quick answer to the request from their bishop.

"It's a tough decision: You want to help, but you also feel that people who turned a blind eye to this for so long should be held accountable," said Jose Jara, 42, a community college English teacher and St. Mary regular.

"A lot of people are going to have to think about this."

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Staff writers Stuart Silverstein and Karen Kaplan contributed to this report.

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