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Attorneys for church, victims debate impact of Los Angeles settlement



By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

Irwin Zalkin, a San Diego attorney who represents victims of sex abuse cases connected with the San Diego Catholic diocese, speaks to members of the media on reaction to the settlement between sex abuse victims and the Los Angeles Catholic diocese during a news conference in Carmel Valley on Monday.

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NORTH COUNTY -- The local church has no plans to follow the lead of the Los Angeles Diocese, which has agreed to pay \$660 million to settle sex-abuse claims against clergy there, an attorney for the Roman Catholic Church in San Diego County said Monday.

Mike Webb, attorney for the Diocese of San Diego, said the Los Angeles settlement won't have any bearing on what happens in 150 San Diego County cases because the church here is in bankruptcy court. The diocese does not have the financial resources that Los Angeles does to pay claims, he said.

"The venue is considerably different," Webb said Monday. "We don't have many pockets and our pockets are not deep."

Attorneys sharply disputed the local church's claims, saying a precedent-setting settlement in another Southern California community cannot help but influence possible monetary awards for plaintiffs. And they disputed the notion that the local diocese does not have the ability to pay similar claims without having to close churches and Catholic schools.

In the \$660 million settlement disclosed over the weekend, 508 victims in the Los Angeles area will receive an average of \$1.3 million apiece in the nation's largest settlement to date in the sex abuse scandal that has rocked the church throughout California and the United States.

The Diocese of San Diego, which covers San Diego and Imperial counties, has 98 churches, runs 50 schools and has nearly 1 million parishioners. Webb said 43 cases from the San Diego region have been settled and 151 are still pending.

Later Monday, at a Del Mar news conference, attorney Irwin Zalkin, who represents 54 alleged victims in San Diego County, said the Los Angeles settlement absolutely will have an impact on the size of awards.

"You can't just ignore the fact that a major archdiocese in your state has just settled 500 cases," Zalkin said. "It's got to have some impact. You may agree with it or not, but it's got to mean something."

Zalkin also disputed the notion that the Diocese of San Diego does not have the ability to pay the kind of awards Los Angeles has agreed to pay, saying the local diocese owns nearly 400 properties, including vacant land and townhomes.

"There was no magic in Los Angeles," Zalkin said. "On a proportionate scale, the same arguments could be made, and were made, that they didn't have the money, that they didn't have the resources. But they didn't file for bankruptcy."

Zalkin accused the Diocese of San Diego of delaying and "stonewalling."

Webb maintained that the diocese is committed to resolving the local cases in a timely manner.

"The Diocese of San Diego has clearly stated its position: It will fairly and equitably compensate victims without crippling the missions of the church," Webb said.

Crippling the church is the last thing victims want, said Guy Lowry, a 47-year-old plumbing contractor from Temecula who says he was molested by two male church leaders in the early 1970s. Lowry spoke at the afternoon news conference.

"We don't want to close any schools. We don't want to sell any churches," Lowry said. "We want a fair settlement."

While money won't restore victims' childhoods, it can put a stop to abuse, he said.

"It's not the value of the dollar as much as the lesson that we're hoping they (church officials) learn," Lowry said.

Lowry also called on Bishop Robert Brom, the region's top church official, to follow Cardinal Roger Mahony's example of meeting with Los Angeles victims and speak to local victims.

The Los Angeles settlement is the largest ever by a Roman Catholic archdiocese since the clergy sexual abuse scandal erupted in Boston in 2002.

Among the largest total payouts was \$100 million in 2004 by the Diocese of Orange County to settle 90 claims. The Diocese of Boston agreed in 2003 to pay \$84 million for 552 cases, the same figure the Diocese of Covington, Ky., agreed last year to pay to settle about 360 claims. Facing a flood of abuse claims, five dioceses - San Diego, Tucson, Ariz.; Spokane, Wash.; Portland, Ore.; Davenport, Iowa - sought bankruptcy protection.

-- The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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