

DIOCESE IN TURMOIL

Judge determines, seals abuse victims' allocations

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In an order startling for its frank conclusions, a Los Angeles judge said yesterday that he had determined the specific settlement awards in each of 144 child-sexual-abuse cases filed against the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego.

Victims of the most egregious abuse, including such acts as sodomy, torture and oral copulation, will receive up to \$2.1 million, according to the order by Superior Court Judge Peter Lichtman. The diocese has agreed to pay a total of \$198.1 million.

The specific amounts, and the range of awards to victims suffering lesser abuse, such as "fondling over clothes" and "forced to watch masturbation," were placed under seal by Lichtman, who cited confidentiality laws.

The settlement was reached in September between diocese attorneys and those representing men and women abused decades ago by priests and other church workers. It ended the Chapter 11 case the diocese filed in federal bankruptcy court in February in lieu of civil-court trials.

Lichtman, who has spent years evaluating similar sexual-abuse cases, made several unequivocal points in yesterday's order: That the allegations were true; that the San Diego cases were the worst he has ever seen; and that the victims' suffering continues and is profound.

"The suffering experienced . . . is truly life altering and psychologically debilitating," Lichtman wrote. "At all times this court felt helpless and ineffective in trying to assuage the grief, sorrow and unbearable weight of pain expressed by the victims."

He also wrote: "The range, extent and depth of abuse that occurred in the San Diego cases are unlike any that this court has previously seen. It is because of this factor that this court's task in determining the allocation was incredibly difficult."

In a statement responding to Lichtman's conclusions, Rodrigo Valdivia, chancellor for the diocese, apologized to victims for their suffering: "The diocese acknowledges again that no amount of money, nor money alone, can adequately resolve the irreparable consequences of sexual abuse."

Attorney Irwin Zalkin, whose firm represented many of the San Diego victims, said Lichtman's order confirmed what he and other victims advocates have been saying for five years, that "the abuse and cover-up in the San Diego diocese was the worst we have seen anywhere in the country."

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