

# Bridgeport Diocese asks court to review ruling on opening sealed abuse records

BRIDGEPORT, Conn. - The Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport has asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review a state court ruling that makes public the sealed documents from 23 sexual abuse lawsuits against six priests settled in 2001.

In an appeal filed July 17, the diocese asked the court to reverse a May 22 ruling by the Connecticut Supreme Court ordering the diocese to release records from the lawsuits.

Also on July 17, the diocese asked the Connecticut Supreme Court to keep in place a stay on its order to release the files until after the U.S. Supreme Court weighs in.

The U.S. court is currently in recess and will not consider whether to hear nonemergency appeals until shortly before the opening of its new term in October.

In a statement announcing the appeal to the Supreme Court, the diocese said the details of primary interest to the public such as the names of abuser priests were made public in 2002 and 2003.

"The cases, and the settlement of them, were exhaustively reported on by the media," the statement said. "The attorneys and victims had access to the sealed documents at issue."

The petition for certiorari is based on the argument that the Connecticut Supreme Court wrongly interpreted the U.S. Constitution's doctrine of "judicial documents" in presuming that all documents filed with the court should be accessible to the public and the media, the diocesan statement said.

The petition also raises the question of whether the state court's order to release the documents is a violation of the religious rights protections of the First Amendment.

The case over the sealed documents began when The New York Times filed suit in 2002 to obtain the documents that it said were a key part of the church's record of handling charges of clergy sex abuse. The Hartford Courant, The Boston Globe and The Washington Post joined the suit.

By effectively declaring that the diocese waived its First Amendment rights by giving the documents to attorneys and victims, even though the court compelled that release, the diocesan statement said the ruling "leaves litigants in an untenable position - either comply with a court order, and, in effect, waive or give up fundamental rights, or face contempt of court for failure to do so."