

Jesuits' Oregon province, facing abuse lawsuits, files for bankruptcy

PORTLAND, Ore. – The Oregon province of the Society of Jesus filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection Feb. 17 citing a number of pending lawsuits over clergy sexual abuse claims.

The petition was filed in U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the District of Oregon in Portland in response to 200 lawsuits filed recently against Jesuits of the province. The abuse claims are primarily from Alaskans who said they had been abused as children by priests.

The Jesuits' Oregon province, based in Portland, serves Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington.

“Our decision to file Chapter 11 was not an easy one, but with approximately 200 additional claims pending or threatened, it is the only way we believe that all claimants can be offered a fair financial settlement within the limited resources of the province,” said Jesuit Father Patrick Lee, provincial, in a Feb. 17 statement.

The statement noted the province has worked “diligently” to resolve claims of priests' misconduct, saying it has settled more than 200 claims and paid more than \$25 million to victims since 2001. That amount does not include payments made by insurers.

A spokesman for the Oregon province told Catholic News Service Feb. 18 that Father Lee would not comment beyond the statement released a day earlier.

In 2007, the province announced a \$50 million settlement between the Jesuits and

more than 100 native Alaskans for cases of sexual abuse involving more than a dozen Jesuits posted in Alaska between 1961 and 1987.

Last March, the Diocese of Fairbanks filed for bankruptcy protection saying it was unable to reach a financial settlement with 140 people who had filed about 150 claims against the diocese. After the diocese filed bankruptcy, the number of sex abuse claimants rose to 288.

Father Lee said he hoped the province's bankruptcy filing "could begin to bring this sad chapter in our province's history to an end."

"We continue to pray for all those who have been hurt by the actions of a few men, so that they can receive the healing and reconciliation that they deserve," he added.

In the bankruptcy petition, the Jesuits' Oregon province listed assets of less than \$5 million and liabilities of nearly \$62 million.

The Associated Press reported that Ken Roosa, an attorney based in Anchorage, Alaska, who filed the abuse claims on behalf of more than 60 Alaskans, has stated the Oregon province is underestimating its assets.

Mr. Roosa claims the province owns Seattle and Gonzaga universities and several high schools, but the presidents of both Jesuit-run universities said their institutions are completely separate from the province.

Jesuit Father Robert Spitzer, president of Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash., said in a Feb. 18 statement that the Jesuits' Oregon province is "a completely separate organization from Gonzaga University," adding that the university's "assets are its own and not subject to others' creditors."

Jesuit Father Stephen Sundborg, president of Seattle University, similarly stressed

in a Feb. 18 statement the university is “an independent entity that is legally separate from the Oregon province of the Society of Jesus. The Society of Jesus does not own or operate Seattle University.”

In a previous statement, Father Sundborg responded to a Jan. 14 lawsuit filed in Alaska on behalf of victims of clergy sexual abuse which alleged that the priest, who was the Jesuits’ Oregon provincial in 1990-96, covered up the sexual abuse of 43 Alaskan children by Jesuit priests.

“The allegations are completely untrue,” he said.

Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane said in a Feb. 17 statement that he was “deeply saddened by reports of abuse of children by anyone, but especially abuse by priests.”

He said he stands in solidarity with the victims and with those who have responded to them with compassion and justice. “My hope is that their response will bring some measure of healing to the community.”

The bishop also said he was grateful for the ministry of “so many faithful members of the Oregon province of the Society of Jesus,” and prayed that through the bankruptcy process the “mission and ministry of the Oregon province might continue.”