

# **Supreme Court declines to stop order on release of Bridgeport diocesan documents**

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Supreme Court declined Oct. 5 to intervene in orders by Connecticut courts requiring the Diocese of Bridgeport to release thousands of pages of material from 23 lawsuits settled against six priests who were sued in sexual abuse cases.

With no comment, the court declined to take the appeal from the diocese, filed after the state Supreme Court upheld a Waterbury Superior Court's order in 2006 that the diocese release documents to four newspapers that sought access to them.

The diocese had sought to keep sealed more than 12,000 pages of depositions, exhibits and legal arguments in the lawsuits, most of which were filed in the mid-1990s. The cases were settled by the diocese in 2001 for undisclosed amounts of money, with the agreement that the documents would remain sealed.

The following year, The New York Times, later joined by the Hartford Courant, the Boston Globe and The Washington Post, filed suit to see the documents. The newspapers described them as a key part of the church's record of how charges of clergy sexual abuse were handled.

In 2006 the Waterbury court ruled that the newspapers were entitled to see the documents. In May, the Connecticut Supreme Court upheld the ruling, but release of the documents was blocked pending the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on whether to take the case.

That request was rejected on the first day of the 2009 court term, along with a 90-page list of other cases similarly rejected.

A statement from the Bridgeport Diocese did not address when it would release the documents.

“We are disappointed that the U.S. Supreme Court decided not to extend the stay,” it said, and noted the content of the sealed documents “soon to be released has already been extensively reported on.”

“For more than a decade, the Catholic Church of Bridgeport has addressed the issue of clergy sexual abuse compassionately and comprehensively,” the statement said.

It went on to decry “the serious threat to the First Amendment rights of all churches and the rightful privacy of all litigants,” which “remain in jeopardy.”

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops also released a statement of support for Bridgeport Bishop William E. Lori.

“We understand and are grateful for his strong defense of the diocese in this case, and especially for the balance he has tried to strike among the principles of compassion, transparency, religious freedom, fundamental fairness and the rule of law,” the USCCB statement said.

It said the U.S. bishops “have taken sustained, concrete steps to fulfill our pledge to ensure a safe environment for children and young people ... and to promote healing and reconciliation of victims and survivors of sexual abuse.”

“However, when a claim of sexual abuse results in litigation, we must remain vigilant against the risk that court-enforced avenues for the legitimate disclosure of documents are not abused in particular cases, resulting in the excessive entanglement of the state in the affairs of the church,” said the USCCB.

It said the bishops also “must insist upon fair treatment for the church in accordance with the rule of law, so that the intense emotions surrounding sexual abuse cases do not result in decisions that would deny the church the same legal protections – including those regarding disclosure of documents – that any other party would enjoy.”