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20 YEARS OF ABUSE SETTLEMENTS FOR US CATHOLIC DIOCESES EXCEEDS $5 BILLION TOTAL

written by Gina Christian | 1:44 PM November 8, 2024



Vestments are seen in this undated photo. (OSV News photo/Tyler Orsburn, CNS)

(OSV News) — The Archdiocese of Los Angeles' $880 million abuse claims settlement, announced Oct. 16, brings the total payouts of U.S. Catholic dioceses for abuse claims since 2004 to more than $5 billion — and possibly more than $6 billion — OSV News has found.

An aggregated total from two decades of reports issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops shows the nation's dioceses and eparchies paid some $4.384 billion to settle claims between 2004 and 2023.

Data for fiscal year 2024 is still pending; however, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles' $880 million settlement and a $323 million settlement announced Sept. 26 by the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York, account for $1.2 billion within the span of less than a month.

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Those two settlements, plus the USCCB total for 2004-2023, add up to $5.59 billion.

The USCCB 2004-2023 total does not appear to include a $660 million settlement announced in 2007 by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles which, along with the Oct. 16 settlement, brings that archdiocese's total to at least $1.54 billion in abuse-related costs over the past two decades.

OSV News is awaiting clarification from the archdiocese on whether the USCCB total for 2007 — listed as $498,678,858 — reflects any portion of the archdiocese's 2007 payout. Carolina Guevara, chief communications officer for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, told OSV News in a Nov. 5 email that her office was working to confirm how the settlement was reported. The overall national total of diocesan settlement payouts for the past two decades could exceed $6.24 billion, if the USCCB data does not already include the 2007 Archdiocese of Los Angeles payout.

To calculate the aggregate payouts over the past two decades, OSV News examined data from the USCCB's annual report on the implementation of the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," also known as the "Dallas Charter." Since adopting the charter in 2002, the USCCB has reported on the total costs expended by the nation's dioceses and eparchies in addressing sexual abuse claims.

That data is collected and prepared by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, using both web-based and mail-in surveys. The response rate for the nation's dioceses for the period 2004-2023 typically has been 99% to 100%. (CARA also includes in the annual report the same data for clerical and mixed religious institutes; however, the response rate from those congregations is usually 68%-72%).

The costs represent funds "expended or otherwise obligated" during a given year as a result of allegations of sexual abuse of a minor. Settlements, therapy payments both for survivors (if not included in a settlement) and for offenders, and attorney fees are all included in the numbers.

From 2004 (the year in which the first such report was issued) to 2013, CARA totaled the data for calendar years. In 2014, the USCCB's Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection changed the reporting period to coincide with the July 1-June 30 fiscal years used by many dioceses and eparchies for their annual audits.

Separate from the CARA figures on abuse settlements are the total amounts dioceses have paid to establish and maintain safe environment protections. Those figures, included in the CARA survey for the USCCB, add up to at least $628.8 million for the years 2004-2023.

The USCCB-CARA data does not include any settlements that dioceses reached with victims prior to 2004. Such amounts vary, with many remaining undisclosed by dioceses.

For example, the Diocese of Superior, Wisconsin, settled a case with two victims in 1989 for a reported $3 million. In January 2002, the Diocese of Tucson, Arizona, settled 11 lawsuits on behalf of 16 plaintiffs for some $14 million. The following year, the same diocese settled another settlement involving five victims for $1.8 million.

Other diocesan settlement amounts agreed to prior to the adoption of the Dallas Charter remain unknown — such as that in an agreement reached by the Diocese of Pueblo, Colorado, with a claimant citing abuse by Father John Beno, who also served as a Colorado state senator from 1981 to 1986.

According to a 2016 Pennsylvania grand jury report, the late Bishop Joseph V. Adamec, who led the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown from 1987 until his retirement in 2011, maintained a "pay-out chart" that specified an amount of direct compensation from the diocese to a victim, depending on the nature of a given instance of clerical sexual abuse. The chart specified payments of $10,000 to $175,000 in exchange for confidentiality agreements or waivers of liability releases.

The USCCB and CARA data does not specify coverage of costs frequently associated with consequences of sexual abuse such as lost wages and addiction recovery treatment, which may or may not be fully covered in a given settlement amount.

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