

# For Baltimore archdiocese, release of grand jury report presents opportunity to atone



Standing across from the Baltimore Basilica are a dozen people representing the hundreds who shared their stories with authorities as part of a four-year investigation by the Maryland Attorney General's Office into sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. On Friday, a judge ruled that a redacted version of the investigation report could be publicly released. Kenneth K. Lam/Baltimore Sun

BY THIRU VIGNARAJAH

As lawmakers debate the Child Victims Act in Annapolis, a Baltimore City judge has agreed to publicly release — only after suitable redaction — a blockbuster report

prepared by the Maryland Attorney General's Office cataloging 80 years of sexual abuse perpetrated by 158 priests and other officials affiliated with the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Releasing the report, the capstone of a grand jury inquiry that spanned four years and examined hundreds of thousands of internal documents, is exactly the right thing to do, morally and legally.

Tucked beneath its sanitized title, the 456-page "Clergy Abuse in Maryland" is expected to chronicle a century of shame. According to the Attorney General's Office, the investigation "uncovered pervasive sexual abuse amongst the priesthood and repeated failures by the Archdiocese to protect the children of Baltimore." In total, it identifies over 600 victims and predicts hundreds more.

Yet, the report spent months tied up in litigation over its public release. At first, Baltimore Archbishop William Lori said the Catholic Church would not oppose the report's distribution, signaling it was braced for a moment of reckoning. Soon after, however, it was revealed the archdiocese was privately paying two prominent attorneys who fought to seal the proceedings and the report itself, according to the Attorney General's Office, making it uncertain whether the findings would ever see the light of day.

The announcement Friday that a redacted version will be available for public review ends the standoff. The anticipated release shows respect for victims who have long fought to expose the Church's complicity in widespread abuse, encourages additional survivors to come forward now knowing they have a voice, and gives the archdiocese an opportunity to atone.

Withholding the report in its entirety would serve only to protect perpetrators, fortifying the strategy of delay and culture of silence they created and counted on. It also would have been a clear misapplication of the law. The American grand jury conducts its work behind closed doors, but its conclusions are meant to be public and unedited. The veil of secrecy, designed to protect witnesses and preserve the integrity of ongoing proceedings, is supposed to be fully lifted once an investigation has run its course.

In criminal cases, that happens each time a grand jury returns an indictment. The same presumption of disclosure applies to investigative grand juries, which have produced eye-opening reports on topics nationwide, including homelessness in California, school safety in Florida and voter fraud in Illinois.

Grand juries have proved potent in exposing institutional wrongdoing that amplified individual crimes. Take, for example, the 2011 investigation of Jerry Sandusky. That grand jury report not only laid bare the depravity of the disgraced football coach, but also excoriated Penn State for its failure to intervene. Several years later, a second grand jury criticized the university's inaction in the face of "rampant and pervasive" hazing and condemned the role of influential alumni and affluent donors in resisting reform.

Like Penn State, the Archdiocese of Baltimore — powerful, popular and politically connected — is an anchor in the community. Its footprint encompasses 153 parishes and missions, 40 elementary schools, 18 high schools, and 462 patient beds at two area hospitals. Baltimore was the first diocese in America, yet it remains today among the last to confront its shameful past.

Two decades ago, an investigative grand jury first put the spotlight on child sexual abuse within the Archdiocese of New York. Subsequent grand jury reports unmasked abuse by clergy and the Church's acquiescence in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Maine and Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania grand jury took a second look in 2018, generating a report similar in scope and scale to the Maryland Attorney General's Office investigation. That inquiry looked at six dioceses from Allentown to Pittsburgh and identified more than 300 "predatory priests" whose rape and abuse victims over 70 years could number "in the thousands."

None of these reports, not even Pennsylvania's incendiary tome, contained more than the bare minimum of redactions. The Baltimore archdiocese deserves the same.

That is especially true since, for many survivors of child sexual abuse in Maryland, an unvarnished public accounting of the truth may be the only justice they get. Criminal prosecutions are vanishingly rare. Memories are fragile, victims are apprehensive, and in places like Baltimore — where the Catholic Church has the highest concentration of parishes in the state — police have competing priorities as the city exceeds 300 murders year after year.

Likewise, civil relief is sharply circumscribed in Maryland. Though survivors do not typically disclose their childhood trauma until they are over 50, plaintiffs here can sue only until age 38, unlike 24 other states where child abuse claims may be revived. The General Assembly is considering a bill (H.B. 1) that would erase this constraint. But, even if passed, it would face a convoluted constitutional challenge because of a messy 2017 law backed by the Catholic Church, which the archdiocese now says irretrievably extinguished all older abuse claims.

Despite the paucity of criminal and civil remedies, there may be no better time to reassure survivors that they are not alone and that their stories will not be edited, discredited or roundly ignored. Between "The Keepers" (a Netflix documentary linking the unsolved 1969 murder of Sister Catherine Cesnik to sexual abuse allegations at a Baltimore Catholic school), the Attorney General's Office report, and potential new legislation, patience with the Church has worn thin, survivors have found strength in their shared horror, and the archdiocese faces a defining inflection point.

Pedophiles cloaked in the vestments of Catholic priests have done untold damage to thousands. Any chance at redemption requires the Archdiocese of Baltimore to admit its failures and commit to change. Unsealing the grand jury report represents the archdiocese's best hope for a new beginning.

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