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Basilica among the St. John's Roman Catholic properties being valued to settle abuse claims

Archbishop issues new statement on Mount Cashel early era cases

Barb Sweet | Posted: Oct. 24, 2021, 1:22 p.m. | Updated: Oct. 26, 2021, 1:28 p.m. | 6 Min Read



The Roman Catholic Basilica of St. John The Baptist in St. John's. — Joe Gibbons/The Telegram - Joseph Gibbons



In a new statement about the compensation process involving the Mount Cashel boys' orphanage in the era of the 1940s, '50s and '60s, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St. John's says it is now aware of 130 sexual abuse victim claims, but that it will not be a final number.

The church has been held vicariously liable for the sexual abuse of that era by certain members of the Christian Brothers.

"There may be more victim claims coming forward and so we do not currently know what the final number or value of these claims will be. This is a major piece of information that we will need to have before we can effectively determine how to bring resolution to all the claims," Archbishop Peter Hundt said in the statement which was read out at weekend masses.

Hundt said the process is "complex, sensitive and not without significant challenges."



Archbishop Peter Hundt of the Diocese of St. John's. — Barb Sweet

St. John's lawyer Geoff Budden said Sunday that number may include other clergy sexual abuse cases besides the early era Mount Cashel cases.

The archdiocese is analyzing its assets and their value, and some properties have been put up for sale already. That process won't be finished until early 2022.

The most renowned property the church owns — the Basilica — is among the buildings and properties undergoing a consideration of "value and sustainability."

The archdiocese is also meeting with clergy and laity to determine its future — "how to best ensure the ongoing practice and celebration of our Catholic faith," Hundt said in his statement.

"It might still be quite a while before we will be able to make definitive and final decisions. In the meantime, we are monitoring closely the operating finances of the archdiocese and the parishes, as well as our ability to continue full operations while proceeding through this process."

Budden commended the church for the frankness.

The Basilica has historic importance, but is a valuable piece of property owned by an organization that owes a large amount of money.

"I think what he is really saying is everything potentially is on the table as part of this restructuring," Budden said. "While I don't think anybody expects that the Basilica is going to be condo-ized, it is important perhaps that the Catholic

community realizes the extent of the changes that have to be considered if they are to meet their obligations.”

That the process will extend into early next year isn’t alarming, he said, adding there is good communication between counsel for the victims and the church.



Geoff Budden — Keith Gosse/The Telegram

However, time is of the essence for a group of victims who are seniors, many in their 80s.

“Our responsibility as counsel for the survivors is to move this case along as fast as possible,” Budden said

“Everybody has to bear in mind how long this battle has been and that our clients are not young men ... We need to impose a discipline on the process so we are not at this for years and years. There’s been too much of that. This has to be resolved for everybody’s sake, but really first in line come the survivors.”

Peter Whittle, a past chairman of the Basilica heritage committee and a parish volunteer over the years, said hearing it said at mass that the national heritage site and the property around it are apparently on the table was a very sad day for Catholics in the province.

However, he described Hundt as a pragmatic realist.

“I think a lot of people may not have realized the gravity of the situation facing the church. ... I wasn’t surprised to see (the Basilica) talked about today from the altar. A lot of people are disturbed.... I am sure the bishop wouldn’t make an announcement like this unless the situation was dire and he had to prepare Catholics in St. John’s,” Whittle said.

Whittle acknowledged that the Basilica site is probably the most valuable property the church owns and he hopes something can be done to preserve it,

possibly non-religious involvement by government or organizations seeking to preserve its historic and architectural significance.

“It’s really hard to imagine the church has come to this point,” Whittle said.

As to whether the congregation can rally around and fundraise to buy properties back, he said parishioners have raised significant funds already for upgrades and repairs and with dwindling numbers, lots of people have stopped donating to the church, especially with the scandals of the ‘80s and ‘90s.

“I know one thing for certain: Catholics are fatigued, they are tired. They are disappointed and it’s not a good time to be looking for more money, in particular, to cover off mistakes that were made within the church,” Whittle said.

The church must abide by the law, he said.

“People were hurt and they deserve compensation.”

He said every parish in the archdiocese is affected by restructuring.

“In little communities throughout the Avalon Peninsula and the Burin Peninsula, these conversations are happening — are we going to have a church? Are we going to have a priest? What is the future of the church? It’s very demoralizing,” Whittle said.

“When you hear an announcement like this today or reference to it, it brings home the reality that nothing is sacred and off-limits when it comes to paying the bills that are due (because of) what members or people of the church caused whether it was 60 years ago or 20 years ago.

"There’s just no upside to this."

A January ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada ended a battle — for former residents who are now elderly men — of more than 20 years led by Budden. Ottawa lawyer Eugene Meehan argued the case for the victims at the Newfoundland and Labrador Supreme Court of Appeal.

In 2018, in the Newfoundland and Labrador Supreme Court, trial judge Alphonsus Faour, ruled the archdiocese could not be found vicariously liable for the conduct of the Christian Brothers. The Court of Appeal concluded the trial judge made errors of law on that point, and that both the relationship between the archdiocese and the Brothers was sufficiently close to justify finding the archdiocese vicariously liable, and that it would have to pay damages to the victims.

The Mount Cashel sexual abuse scandal is most widely associated with the abuse of boys of a different era — the 1970s and 1980s — the revelation of which prompted the 1989-90 Hughes Inquiry. That era was not part of this civil case, and the boys from earlier decades were not part of compensation from the provincial government when it settled a block of cases from the '70s and '80s more than 20 years ago.

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