

Diocese lawsuit casts too wide a net

I am a lawyer and a member of the New Jersey State Bar Association. Although I am proud to be a lawyer, I admit this fact with some remorse.

This is because lawyers are repeatedly blamed for cashing in on other people's grief. I would like to think such behavior is the exception and not the rule.

Unfortunately, a lawsuit recently filed against the Camden Diocese did nothing to encourage this belief.

The lawsuit accuses "the diocese" of engaging in a long-standing pattern and practice of sexually abusing parishioners. It alleges a diocesan "cover-up" so widespread that it takes 270 pages to relate.

The lawsuit names several priests, many of whom are dead. It refers to acts of abuse occurring well before I came to New Jersey. It includes accusations preceding the birth of many current members of the diocese.

In short, the lawsuit is quick to accuse and condemn the diocese "as a whole." In so doing, it ignores the fact that the diocese consists of more than 400,000 people who reside in six southern New Jersey counties. These people include my husband and me.

I clearly don't want to understate the seriousness of abuse of whatever kind at any level. On the other hand, I feel the sweeping allegations in this lawsuit form their own abuse — an abuse of process.

In effect, the suit makes more than 400,000 of us "de facto" defendants merely by our "association of faith" in the diocese. We stand accused of "sexual abuse" and "cover-up" as if named in the first instance.

I categorically deny these allegations. They defame my character and the character of hundreds of thousands more.

The lawsuit is made more compelling since it seeks to dissolve the diocese. This is in spite of many kind acts and community services performed by the diocese.

Members of the diocese feed and clothe the hungry. They provide relief in times of natural disaster. They find refuge and other forms of assistance for victims of domestic violence. They provide educational opportunities for disadvantaged youngsters.

Both tragedy and irony exist in this case. The tragedy is that sexual abuse can and does take place in nearly every segment of our society. It is not limited by one's religion, age, creed, color, sex or profession.

Fortunately, the bishop has

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established a policy and procedure to prevent future problems in the diocese.

The irony of this case is the application of its proposed remedy to other lawsuits. If the court can dissolve the Camden Diocese based on the immoral act of a few members, where does it stop?

Does it mean the court can dissolve the New Jersey State Bar Association based on the immoral acts of a few lawyers? Perhaps it means lawyers can continue to throw stones — even if they live in glass houses.

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