

Lawsuit brought by man who said he was sexually abused by Roman Catholic bishop settled

- By Mark Pratt Associated Press
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A lawsuit brought by a former altar boy who said he was raped as a child in the 1960s by a now-deceased Roman Catholic bishop in Massachusetts has been settled, the sides announced Friday.

Then Rev. Christopher J. Weldon, bishop of Springfield, Mass., prepares to receive the Crozier (symbol of office) from the Most Rev. Richard J. Cushing, archbishop of Boston, March 28, 1950, at St. Michael's Cathedral. A lawsuit brought by a former altar boy who said he was sexually abused as a child in the 1960s by the now-deceased Weldon has been settled, **the sides announced Friday, May 26, 2023.**

The plaintiff identified in court papers as John Doe alleged in the suit filed in February 2021 that not only was he abused by former Diocese of Springfield Bishop Christopher Weldon as well as two other clergy, but also that **the church engaged in a yearslong coverup to protect the bishop's reputation and legacy.**

The suit also said that even after abuse allegations against Weldon were found to be credible, diocesan officials as late as 2019 denied them.

St. Louis Archbishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, who served as Springfield bishop at that time, was named in the lawsuit, as well as members of his former team.

The diocese's current bishop in a statement announcing the settlement apologized.

"Mr. Doe's allegations were determined to be credible, therefore, any public statement made on behalf of the Diocese in May or June of 2019 that is inconsistent with that is withdrawn," Bishop William Byrne said. "We apologize to Mr. Doe for any harm those statements caused. We regret that interaction with the Diocese and civil litigation, often the last stop in trying to resolve these cases, can leave survivors feeling revictimized."

Terms of the settlement were not disclosed.

The alleged abuse occurred when the plaintiff was an altar boy at St. Anne Parish in Chicopee, Massachusetts, when he was from 9 to 11 years old. Weldon served as bishop from 1950 until 1977 and died in 1982.

Before the lawsuit was even filed, a retired Superior Court judge hired by the diocese found that claims of abuse regarding Weldon were "unequivocally credible," and that there was a "reluctance to fervently pursue an evaluation of allegations against (Weldon) due to his prominence and revered legacy in the religious community."

"The fact that Mr. Doe was forced to pursue litigation in the face of the report prepared by retired Judge Peter A. Velis, confirms the Church's continuing failure, despite

protestations to the contrary, **to accept responsibility for the atrocities committed,**” Nancy Frankel Pelletier, a lawyer for the plaintiff, said in a statement.

Bishop Byrne commended the plaintiff for coming forward and said the church has learned how to better respond to abuse allegations. ***Concealing or dissuading anyone from reporting abuse will not be tolerated, he said.***

“It is Mr. Doe’s hope that Bishop Byrne’s statement will be heeded, and that no other survivor will be revictimized for speaking their truth,” Pelletier said.

The diocese fought to have the suit dismissed based on charitable immunity and the doctrine of church autonomy, derived from the First Amendment, even taking their case to the state’s highest court. The Supreme Judicial Court, however, last July ruled in the plaintiff’s favor.

[Emphasis **added**, in places]

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