



Berkshire Eagle

Gary Mercure, a former New York priest, stares Feb. 10, 2011, at the jury as a guilty verdict is read after being tried in Berkshire County Superior Court for the rape of two altar boys in the 1980s in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. The Roman Catholic Church is opposing efforts in New York to allow sex abuse accusers to file lawsuits after the statute of limitations as expired.

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For its victims, child sex abuse is a lifetime sentence, so we support a bill to eliminate New York's statute of limitations on lawsuits in these situations.

Now, victims of child sex abuse can file a lawsuit up until they turn 23. But their anguish doesn't vanish with their birthday. Their scars don't go away.

The victims must struggle every day to carry the weight of what they endured; why should the perpetrators be allowed, after a few years have passed, to move past the possibility that they could one day be called to account?

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The chance to get justice is worth preserving.

Truth and justice are ideals, you might think, leaders of the Catholic Church in New York would celebrate.

But despite all the revelations of the past 25 years, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church still is not willing to stand firmly on the side of child victims of adult abusers, especially when those abusers are Catholic priests.

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The unfortunate truth is that, in many cases of child sexual abuse — including several in our area — Catholic priests have been exposed as the perpetrators.

Church leaders have expressed sympathy for victims, and over time, the church has gotten better about exposing and firing abusive priests. But still the church has put its own interests first, even if that has meant cutting off the only avenue for redress that victims have.

Catholic Church leaders in New York are fighting the bill to eliminate the statute of limitations on lawsuits.

Many victims of sex abuse hide the cause of their suffering. It can take years for them to feel able to speak about what happened, more years to take action. It is cruel to tell people finally coming to terms with their abuse that it's too late, legally, to do anything about it.

The bill would also give victims of past abuse a one-year window in which to file lawsuits, no matter how long ago the abuse occurred. After that, lawsuits could not be filed in cases for which the statute of limitations had expired before the law's adoption.

A statement from New York's Catholic Conference referred to the "evil actions of long-dead individuals" in reference to sex abuse by priests.

We're not talking about reparations for slavery here. We're talking about abuse that took place in the last few decades, or is still taking place today.

A law like this one, adopted in California, led to \$1.2 billion being paid by dioceses there.

In New York, the conference said, such a law would cause "catastrophic financial harm" to the church.

The conference seems to believe Catholic priests victimized so many children, their lawsuits will bankrupt the church.

The Catholic Conference could be exaggerating the consequences of this bill. But if the choice is between justice for child sex abuse victims and a solvent Catholic Church, we choose justice.

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