

## OUR OPINION

# Settlement offers overdue contrition, a chance to do better

With the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield's settlement announcement, a powerful institution that deals in absolution finally accepted a real measure of accountability to a Chicopee man who endured clergy abuse as a boy and undermining of his truth as an adult. The end to this saga, long delayed by the diocese's shameful obfuscation, underscores the fact that often such morally necessary accountability can only be unearthed by the courage of survivors and the tireless truth-seeking of community journalists.

The settlement agreement averts a trial in the civil lawsuit brought against the diocese by a man identified in court documents as John Doe. A decade ago, when the Springfield Diocese and the Catholic Church more broadly were grappling with the fallout of a systemic sexual abuse coverup scandal, John Doe came forward with allegations that the late Bishop Christopher J. Weldon and several other priests gang-raped him while he was an altar boy in the 1960s.

But diocese leadership for years sought to discredit John Doe and obfuscate the extent of abuse accusations against Bishop Weldon, a prominent 20th-century diocesan figure whose name and likeness appeared on properties across the Springfield Diocese. Weldon's name was kept off the running list of "credibly accused" clergy — a mechanism meant to increase the diocese's accountability and transparency in how it handled the many credible complaints of abuse against priests it employed.

The diocese eventually did place Bishop Weldon's name on the credibly accused list and soon after scrubbed most diocesan references to him and exhumed his body from a prominent spot in the Gate of Heaven Cemetery. But that was only after the diocese hired retired Judge Peter Velis to conduct an independent review, in which the former Superior Court justice found John Doe's allegations "unequivocally credible" — though the diocese's own review board also concluded the allegations were credible years earlier while doing little to officially acknowledge them.

The exposure of the diocese's effort to save face at the expense of retraumatizing a clergy abuse victim as well as the public pressure that led the diocese to tap Judge Velis for his independent report can be traced directly to the dogged investigative work of former Eagle reporter and editor Larry Parnass. He is now executive editor of *The Republican* in Springfield. As we have urged before on this editorial page, neither the diocese nor the Western Massachusetts community should look away from the painful truths revealed for public scrutiny by Mr. Parnass' work: the physical and spiritual trauma John Doe and others endured at the hands of socially powerful clergyman, the contemptible cover-up attempt by a diocese ostensibly working to ease the pain of an abuse scandal.

Those truths would never have seen the light of day without John Doe's courage in coming forward and Mr. Parnass' careful and consummate reporting

work — and both individuals were punished for their good deeds. We can't imagine what it was like for John Doe to suffer not just the unspeakable injury of abuse but the demoralizing insult of years-long denial. We are familiar, though, with the hardship the diocese decided to heap on Mr. Parnass and *The Berkshire Eagle* by filing a subpoena demanding an array of information. The diocese's demands included access to reporter notes that could have compromised Mr. Parnass' promises of confidentiality to key sources in his investigate work on this local chapter of a sprawling clergy abuse scandal. A judge deemed the diocese's seemingly punitive tactic "a classic fishing expedition," though it was one that cost *The Eagle* around \$20,000 to fight in court. In order to defend a reporter's critical work and the powers of accountability with which the First Amendment charges the free press, that's a price we were willing to pay — but it's a heavy one, as any community newspaper trying to survive modernity would attest.

While the settlement agreement's monetary aspect is confidential, we believe the most crucial steps toward closure and justice come out of the diocese's admissions in Friday's statement from Bishop William D. Byrne. The diocese acknowledges not only the extent of John Doe's allegations but their credibility, and more importantly it formally retracts past statements that contradicted or muddled this reality. Bishop Byrne's statement also alludes to the broader issue of how the diocese handles all abuse claims, underscoring the need to not just help survivors who came forward but avoid further harm by needlessly retraumatizing those who have already endured great pain. The statement also announces a new hire to lead the diocese's Office of Safe Environment and Victim Assistance.

Arguably, this is an ounce of contrition where a pound is needed. The statement gives no mention of the diocese's very recent efforts to drag its feet on this issue, including using the courts to target a reporter and attempt to expose confidential sources in years of sensitive reporting. Still, there is real contrition in the bishop's statement — a prerequisite for the dignity survivors deserve and a real pathway forward for the diocese to earn back the moral trust it has systematically relinquished for years. A chance at healing requires recognizing just how deeply went these festering wounds. We hope the diocese will follow the bishop's words with action and adopt a new standard of care for those it has wounded to which it will faithfully hold itself. And we wish the most possible peace for John Doe.

For there to be peace, there must first be truth. While it is often said that the truth will out, it does not do so passively. That the Springfield Diocese or any powerful institution is forced to grapple with the truth of its costly failures and grievous harms is only possible because of wounded but unbroken survivors like John Doe and the disinfecting spotlight directed by journalists like Larry Parnass.