

Keeler letter reveals abuse

Cardinal says 83 priests accused over 7 decades

'Spiritual equivalent of murder'

\$4.1 million in settlements go to 8 victims in 20 years

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Calling the sexual abuse of children by clergy "the spiritual equivalent of murder," Cardinal William H. Keeler has disclosed that more than 80 priests have been accused of molesting minors in the Baltimore archdiocese over the past seven decades.

In a letter sent today to the 180,000 Catholic households in the archdiocese, Keeler said that since the 1930s, 41 diocesan priests and 42 men in religious orders and priests from other dioceses have been accused of sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. None of the men is now in ministry, and all the cases have been reported to civil authorities, Keeler said. Twenty-six of the priests died before their accusers came forward.

The cardinal also said that the archdiocese has reached settlements with eight victims totaling \$4.1 million over the past 20 years, nearly all of it covered by insurance.

Keeler will release details about the accused priests during a meeting today with clergy, and then will release the information, including the names of the priests, to the public. The information will be posted on the archdiocesan Web site this afternoon at www.archbalt.org.

In the letter, Keeler offered his most detailed and personal apology for his failings in the sexual abuse scandal that has shaken the American Catholic Church for most of the past year.

"My fellow bishops and I must respond to the violence already visited on our children by saying we are sorry," Keeler wrote. "At times, we have let our fears of scandal override the need for the kind of openness that helps prevent abuse. In the past, we sometimes have responded to victims and their families as adversaries, not as suffering members of the Church. I am deeply sorry for the harm done to children entrusted to our care."

Later in the letter, Keeler spoke more personally: "I humbly ask forgiveness for my mistakes. Please pray for me so that I may better serve."

The disclosures by the archdiocese come more than eight months after the scandal first broke when the Boston Globe reported efforts to protect pedophile priests in the Archdiocese of Boston. Since then, many other dioceses have looked back into their files and disclosed past incidents of sexual abuse.