

April 12, 2007 - **Bishop Skylstad asked to resign**
Spokesman Review, Spokane, WA, by John Stucke

Four prominent Spokane Catholics have asked Bishop William Skylstad to resign, saying the \$48 million bankruptcy deal he struck to settle sex-abuse claims against the Spokane Catholic Diocese is a "complete disaster."

The four men, Donald Herak, Thomas Tilford, James Workland, and Ronald Caferro, met with and wrote letters to Skylstad and vowed, "we will not contribute one dime to this unfortunate, costly and mistaken mediated settlement."

The ultimatum to resign underscores fractures within the Catholic community about how best to handle the priest sex abuse crisis that persuaded the bishop to take the diocese into bankruptcy 2 ½ years ago.

"We detect a backlash in the parishes, which we believe will only become more active when the complete details of the settlement are disclosed to the parishioners," they wrote, calling themselves The Committee Seeking the Resignation of the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Spokane.

The bishop dismissed their demands in a three-page reply, calling the settlement - which would resolve 180 claims of sex abuse - a challenging yet necessary step to bring the church out of crisis.

"To put this settlement to the wind is a gamble no prudent man of business would consider," the bishop wrote, after pointing out that the diocese has secured \$20 million from insurers as part of the deal.

The four men are business leaders and wealthy Catholic donors. They want the bishop replaced by someone who would review the settlement and put the deal to an up-or-down vote of parishioners.

"The faithful who are risking their property and money should have the same rights as the recipients of the funds. Who can possibly argue with the fairness of this plan?" they asked.

Sex abuse victims and others with a legal stake in the bankruptcy are now casting votes on the settlement proposal. If approved, it will be presented as part of a broad plan of reorganization to U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Patricia Williams in two weeks.

Herak is a former chairman of Gonzaga University's board of trustees. The Jesuit college's Herak School of Engineering bears his name. He earned his fortune as owner of Acme Concrete Co.

Contacted at home about the letters, Herak declined to comment.

"I just want to express my disappointment that (The Spokesman-Review) has seen them," he said. "That was a personal letter and I won't discuss it."

Tilford and Workland didn't return phone calls. Tilford, an attorney, businessman and leader of the Hogan Entrepreneurial Leadership Program at Gonzaga, oversaw his family's gift of \$2.3 million to the university seven years ago. He serves on the board of trustees.

Workland is an attorney with the firm Workland Witherspoon PLLC and serves on the Gonzaga University President's Council.

Caferro, owner of Ecolite Manufacturing Company Inc., declined to comment. His signature was written by someone else granted permission to do so, according to the letter.

The resignation demand surprised Shaun Cross, who is the diocese's bankruptcy lawyer.

"I'm not Catholic, but it's my understanding that only the pope can remove a bishop. It's also my understanding that Mr. Herak is not the pope," Cross said.

Parishioners have been asked to contribute \$10 million toward the settlement by the end of the year. A fundraising effort has begun. Any shortfall may be collected through borrowing or by selling bonds. Parish property secures this \$10 million commitment.

The bishop is expected to raise another \$6 million. These financial terms are secured by several large parishes, including Our Lady of Lourdes Cathedral.

Diocese attorney Greg Arpin, a Catholic and Gonzaga alumni, criticized the letter writers.

"They certainly have a right to their opinion and right to disagree," Arpin said, "but in our view these letters reflect a real misunderstanding of the nature and complexity of what has happened.

"Frankly, at this point, it involves a lot of looking in from the outside at a situation ... and Monday morning quarterbacking."

The bishop wrote in his reply to the men that there are about 10,000 Catholic households with a combined annual income of about \$450 million who give regularly to the church. About 12,000 more Catholic households don't give money to the church. He said the settlement is within reach of the diocese and unwinding it now could expose parishioners to potential jury awards or settlements influenced by high-dollar payouts in California.

Arpin said the diocese has always depended upon regular churchgoers to fund the Eastern Washington ministry.

"Small contributions from the people in the pews support this diocese. Always have," he said. "And that's how this settlement will be funded, not by the big contribution of a few moneyed people, but by everybody."

After the bishop replied, Herak, Tilford, Caferro and Workland wrote again, taking exception to the bishop's insistence that the Catholic community of today must atone for the actions of pedophile priests decades ago.

"We are the perpetrators of the abuse," Skylstad wrote in his reply. "That 'we' is the perceived community of bishops, priests and laity, in communities over a 50-year period. You may not like being in that 'we,' but that is the way it is."

The four calling for Skylstad's resignation responded: "You are just wrong on that point. It could not be perceived by any rational person that any lay person could have perpetuated or condoned this long string of child abuse by a number of Spokane diocesan priests.

"Only a handful of the laity even knew this violation of both God and man's law was even taking place. This sin of pedophilia became known to the bishops of Spokane many years ago, but they chose to take limited or no action or even worse covered it up."