

LOS ANGELES -- The nation's largest Roman Catholic archdiocese said Friday it will pay \$60 million to settle 45 sex abuse lawsuits, the largest payout yet by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and among the biggest resulting from the molestation crisis that's plagued the church.

The cases were among more than 500 abuse claims pending against the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

"It's a day of healing and reconciliation as we move forward with these 45 cases," Cardinal Roger Mahony told The Associated Press. "This is very special for these victims in their moment of healing."

The claims settled Friday involve 22 priests and include allegations from two periods when the archdiocese had limited or no insurance against sexual abuse claims -- prior to the mid-1950s and after 1987.

Mahony said \$40 million of the payment would come from the archdiocese, while \$20 million would be from religious orders plus a small amount of independent insurance coverage.

Negotiations on the deal had been in progress for at least a year but were held up because attorneys for the plaintiffs wanted the church to release the accused priests' private personnel files.

The agreement calls for an independent judge to review those files and decide which documents can be released to the alleged victims. That process is expected to take several months.

Ray Boucher, the lead plaintiffs' attorney, said the settlement was the largest the Los Angeles Archdiocese had reached "by far." Boucher said at least two plaintiffs had died while awaiting the resolution.

"I wasn't certain we would ever get it done, but thankfully 45 very injured people will have a chance to begin to heal, particularly at this time of the year," he said. "The big concern is the 700 or 800 victims who are out there who still have claims pending."

Boucher said that not all of the plaintiffs' attorneys had signed off on the finalized documents, but that process was expected to be completed by Monday.

Don Steier, an attorney who represents many of the accused priests, did not immediately return a call seeking comment.

David Clohessy, national director for the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, said he was happy for the alleged victims who were part of the settlement but remained angry at Mahony and other church leaders.

"We recognize it for what it is, which is a purely business move designed to keep Mahony out of depositions and off the witness stand. That's what every bishop fears the most and that's why they settled," Clohessy said.

"His claim to care about healing is ludicrous in light of his expensive and hardball effort for years to delay and stall."

Sex abuse by Roman Catholic priests has cost the U.S. church at least \$1.5 billion since 1950.

Friday's settlement was the largest in California since 2004, when the Diocese of Orange agreed to spend \$100 million to settle 90 abuse claims. It was also the fourth-largest in the nation since the clergy abuse crisis erupted in the Archdiocese of Boston in 2002, according to an AP review of settlements.

Four dioceses -- Tucson, Ariz.; Spokane, Wash.; Portland, Ore., and Davenport, Iowa -- sought bankruptcy protection from a flood of lawsuits. Tucson has emerged from the process.