

Developments in a current sex-abuse lawsuit cast doubt on church's promises of transparency.

Public relations executives often explain that the quickest way to turn a scandal into a publicity nightmare is to engage in deceit and cover-up. It's one of the most basic lessons in government, the corporate world and nonprofit organizations. Yet the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange has ignored those lessons and has caused a much-deserved furor over its latest mishandling of the child-rape and abuse scandal.

Like other dioceses nationwide, the Orange diocese for years has been dealing with an onslaught of lawsuits accusing various priests and church leaders of rape and sexual abuse. One current lawsuit involves a woman who was sexually abused by a former assistant basketball coach at church-owned Mater Dei High School when she was 16. Bishop Tod Brown was called to testify under oath about what he knew about sex-abuse accusations, and the diocese strenuously fought the public release of his deposition. That was a foolish move, and it gave observers good reason to wonder what the diocese was hiding.

We learned the answer Thursday when Orange County Superior Court Judge Gail Andler rightly ordered the public release of the deposition. In it, the bishop admitted that he personally was accused in the 1990s of molesting a boy many years earlier – a charge that law enforcement said was not corroborated and that church leaders determined to be without merit.

The biggest problem wasn't the allegation, but the cover-up. The bishop's much-publicized list of promises of how the diocese would improve its handling of the sex-abuse matter, called the Covenant with the Faithful, promised a new level of openness, yet the bishop kept hidden the accusation against him. That's what most angered victims of abuse, who for years have dealt with the diocese's secrecy and denial. "They made a deal with us; they said they would be transparent," one abuse survivor told the Register.

Furthermore, the covenant promised that the diocese would do everything it could to help the abused with the healing process. But in this case, the diocese's lawyers – one gets the sense these days that the diocese has allowed legal reasoning to supersede church teachings on its handling of such matters – have spent hours grilling the victim about her past sex life.

And the diocese's point man on the sexual abuse matter, Monsignor John Urell, last week began giving a deposition, but the next day he was on a plane to Canada for treatment for an undisclosed medical condition, according to attorney John Manly, who represents the woman in the Mater Dei lawsuit. "Some people might call that an obstruction of justice," he told us, noting that Mr. Urell now is conveniently outside American jurisdiction.

The diocese keeps avoiding forthrightness. Church leaders claimed last week that they didn't know why the monsignor was at the Southdown Institute, a facility in Ontario, Canada, that treats priests with a variety of problems. On Friday, Mr. Urell's attorney released a statement

saying that Mr. Urell "suffers from an acute anxiety disorder caused by the strain of his prior responsibility for responding to complaints of sexual abuse by others. ... His physician has determined that he is unable to finish his testimony as a witness in the case involving the former Mater Dei coach." The statement added that "Msgr. Urell has never sexually abused anyone, and has never been accused of sexually abusing anyone. His treatment at Southdown is specifically related to acute anxiety."

Perhaps the most disturbing revelation released this week: Bishop Brown "allowed a priest accused of raping a 15-year-old girl to work at a parish with an elementary school," according to a Register news report. "I think earlier on with regard to molestation cases, that a lot of bishops, including myself, were not fully aware of the seriousness of the problem in terms of putting other people at risk," the bishop said in his testimony in the Mater Dei case.

It's hard to understand how anyone would not realize the seriousness of child rape. Then again, the bishop's testimony reinforced what many critics have long contended: The church and this diocese were more interested in protecting their reputations and their careers than protecting children.

Slowly, the truth is coming out. Bishop Brown should have known that it would have come out eventually.