

5-13-08 - Jury awards ex-altar boy \$8.7 million in damages

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BURLINGTON, Vt. --A jury awarded \$8.7 million in damages Tuesday to a former altar boy who sued the Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington over sexual abuse he says he suffered at the hands of a priest.

The man, now a 40-year-old mechanical engineer in Lakewood, Colo., sued the diocese over molestation he claims he suffered at the hands of parish priest Rev. Edward Paquette in the 1970s. His suit claimed negligent supervision by the diocese, accusing church officials of hiring Paquette despite warnings about allegations of molestation of boys in previous assignments.

After about five hours of deliberations, the Chittenden County Superior Court jury returned a verdict calling for \$950,000 in compensatory damages and \$7.75 million in punitive damages. The compensatory damages are designed to compensate the man for his pain and suffering; the punitive damages are to punish the diocese.

The Associated Press does not identify victims of sexual assault without their consent.

The man testified that Paquette -- now retired and living in Westfield, Mass. -- routinely groped him and other altar boys at Christ the King Church in Burlington. He didn't file suit until 2005, and Paquette wasn't named as a defendant.

One of the man's attorneys, John Evers, told jurors in his closing arguments Monday that a multimillion dollar award was necessary to punish the diocese for protecting priests instead of children.

Church lawyers contended that the diocese's leaders at the time believed pedophilia could be cured with prayer and psychological treatment. They said they would appeal Tuesday's verdict.

Bishop Salvatore Matano told reporters at the courthouse: "The verdict is a very serious impact on a rural diocese, a small, rural diocese, and I do not want in any way to inflict any suffering or any pain on the faithful of this diocese because of what happened in the past."

"The evidence was compelling," said Jerome F. O'Neill, the lead attorney representing the man. "Our client went through what no child should ever have to go through, and he did so because the diocese paid no attention to the perpetrator it was putting in its parishes."

He said the man had tears in his eyes when the verdicts were announced.

"What was important to him was that a jury had recognized what he had been through," O'Neill said.