Portland Archdiocese files for bankruptcy

In the wake of costly sex-abuse lawsuits, the church rallies its 'family' in trying times

WILLIAM MCCALL
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

PORTLAND — Portland Archbishop John Vlazny urged Roman Catholics to rally around the church, one day after the Portland Archdiocese became the first in the nation to file for bankruptcy because of the mounting costs of sex abuse lawsuits.

In a brief sermon during morning Mass Wednesday, Vlazny did not refer directly to his decision to seek Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection for the Archdiocese of Portland, announced Tuesday.

The archbishop said the purpose of the church was to follow the teachings of Christ, including the need to take responsibility for sin in order for it to be forgiven.

After the betrayal of Christ, "I imagine heads had to bow when the name Judas Iscariot was said," Vlazny told a small group of mostly elderly parishioners scattered among the front rows of the Cathedral of The Immaculate Conception, referring to the disciple whom the Bible says betrayed Christ.

"Undoubtedly many heads are bowing in embarrassment and shame today," he said, "when we still have traces of that original sin in our church."

Vlazny called the church a family that often suffers together while it seeks to help others.

"Sometimes we are ashamed and need to do penance because of problems in our family," the archbishop said. "But we cannot stay mired in that frustration and that sense of failure."

Josie Meskill, a longtime parishioner who immigrated from Ireland in 1947, said many of her fellow parishioners were concerned about the sex abuse lawsuits and the bankruptcy, but they try to put it in perspective.

Meskill said the Roman Catholic church has survived war, schism, persecution and upheaval "so this is not the end of the world."

"Like the archbishop said today, we are a family, and we stand by each other," Meskill said.

Another longtime parishioner who identified himself only by his first name, Thomas, said he was a retired accountant who had seen plenty of companies facing financial problems during his career.

The church was forced to make a business decision to seek protection for assets that can be used to help the poor and needy, he said.

He also questioned whether some the victims and their attorneys were asking too much, referring to one victim seeking $130 million in damages for alleged abuse.

"Come on," Thomas said. "There is such a thing as common sense."

Initiative petitions still subject to 'sign-and-date' regulation

An injunction request that claims signatures were 'unfairly disqualified' was turned down Wednesday

ASSOCIATED PRESS

PORTLAND — State elections officials can continue rejecting initiative petitions that are improperly dated or signed, a U.S. District Court judge ruled Wednesday.

Judge Owen Panner turned down an injunction request by a coalition of political activists, who argue that voter signatures are being unfairly disqualified due to tiny errors like "a slip of the pen."

A state requirement dating to 2002 mandates that petition circulators must sign and date every signature sheet they turn in. State elections officials do not count petition sheets with mistakes such as crossed-out and rewritten dates.

Organizers of initiatives on same-sex marriage, medical marijuana, forests and other issues say that rule violates the First Amendment, and could deprive voters of their rights to weigh in on initiatives.

But assistant attorney general David Leith, who represented Secretary of State Bill Bradbury at Wednesday's hearing, said that the sign-and-date requirement is meant to guard against fraud and forgery.

"The problem is trying to distinguish between which one (error) was a slip of the pen and which one was a fraudulent attempt to turn in an invalid petition," Leith said.

Portland attorney Dan Meek said plaintiffs hope to learn on July 21 whether the "hundreds of signatures" thrown out under the state regulation will be declared valid.

Judge Panner could issue one of three rulings. He may mandate that the rule remain in place, or he could require secretary of state to accept the rejected petitions. He might also ask circulators to submit affidavits verifying that the signatures and dates are correct. That could be difficult because many petition circulators are out of town, the lawyer said.

Initiative organizers worry that the state elections rule could hurt smaller grassroots efforts by tossing out even a few signatures.

"Obviously all the initiatives with millions of dollars can afford to collect twice as many signatures. But our campaign has been close to the bone," said John Sajo, chief petitioner for the medical marijuana initiative.

'Express lane' allows business passengers speedy airport checks

The automated screening process is aimed at easing airport congestion

BRIAN BAKST
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

MINNEAPOLIS — Select airline passengers breezed through security Wednesday at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport in the start of an experiment to ease delays and make flying a little more agreeable.

Under the program, frequent business fliers will not be subject to random searches if they pass background checks in advance and do not set off any alarms while moving through security.

Minneapolis-St. Paul is the first of five U.S. airports to take part in the program, which could be made permanent. Airports in Boston, Los Angeles, Houston and Washington are scheduled to adopt the practice over the next two months.

By midmorning, about 50 Northwest Airlines passengers used the special express lane that the Transportation Security Administration hopes will reduce wait times for frequent fliers while allowing screeners to focus their attention elsewhere.

"If we can ease the congestion at the busy checkpoints just a little bit, that's a good reason to have the registered traveler program," said Carol DiBattiste, chief of staff for the TSA.

Over the past two weeks, about 2,400 frequent business travelers have signed up, providing scans of irises and fingerprints and extensive personal information. That information was cross-checked against several criminal and terror-related databases.

DiBattiste said the overwhelming majority of those who applied were admitted into the program. She would not comment on those who failed.

On Wednesday, some of those registered travelers were moving through the lone express lane at the airport's six security checkpoints. It took about a minute for registered travelers to get through security and about five minutes for everyone else.

The registered travelers presented their boarding passes to an agent who asked them to put their left index finger on a scanner. After about three seconds, a computer screen read: "Success. You may proceed."

The registered travelers still had to go through a metal detector and their carry-on bags had to go through an X-ray machine. However, they were not subject to random searches once they passed that point.

Twin Cities businessman Bert Harman said he had written two letters to Congress asking for something like the program, and he was happy when he got it. There was no line when he went through security.

"It was simple so far, hopefully it stays that way," he said.

Gary Fishman, senior vice president for Northwest, said he hopes the program will encourage business travelers to fly rather than drive. Airlines lost many customers after Sept. 11 and the security restrictions that followed.

Justin Oberman, a TSA official in charge of the program, said the system has adequate safeguards.

"If you are able to beat the background check, you still have to go through security," he said. "You're going to have to get through the metal detector."

Brian Bakst is a writer for the Associated Press.

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