

Yearlong 'window' in New York statute of limitations on abuse suits opens

ALBANY, N.Y. (CNS) – New York state's yearlong "window" in the statute of limitations opened Aug. 14, allowing suits to be filed by victims alleging abuse by priests, church workers and employees of public schools, hospitals and other institutions no matter how long ago the alleged abuse occurred.

New York Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan in a video message on Twitter noted that the day was also the feast of St. Maximilian Kolbe, who gave his life at the Nazis' Auschwitz death camp in Poland to spare the life of a young father.

The saint, the cardinal said, is revered for his bravery but also for something else: "He kept his faith and hope and love in a very dark time."

"Today I don't mind admitting to you is a dark time in the life of the church," Cardinal Dolan said. "You've probably been hearing that this is the first day of the opening of the statute of limitations, so we're going to hear a lot today about people bringing suit against the Catholic Church and other organizations, public schools, government organizations, Boy Scouts and hospitals ... you name it ... for past sexual abuse."

Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed the Child Victims Act into law Feb. 14, opening this window in the state's statute of limitations and making it easier for abuse victim-survivors to sue over the next year. The state's Catholic bishops supported the final measure because it was drafted to include both private and public institutions. Earlier versions only targeted the Catholic Church.

“The fiscal impact on the Catholic Church and other organizations won’t become clear for weeks or months,” said Dennis Poust, director of communications for the New York State Catholic Conference, the bishops’ public policy arm. “Today is a day for survivors to tell their stories and to take an important step on their long journey toward healing.”

“The bishops want to accompany survivors on this journey, to thank them for bravely coming forward, and to again apologize unconditionally for what they endured at the hands of those who so grievously abused their trust,” he said in a statement.

“It is a tough time, it’s a dark time,” Cardinal Dolan said in his video message. “It’s especially difficult for our beloved victims and their families to see all this drug up again, to have these wounds reopened. It’s a tough time for our victims, survivors and families and I’d ask you to pray for them.”

He also asked for their prayers for others in the archdiocese: “for the overwhelming majority of our great priests who’ve been extraordinarily faithful, virtuous and hardworking in the midst of all this. They suffer.”

The priests are good people who also “hate to see this wound reopened, but they keep telling me, ‘Cardinal, we need to reach out with justice and love to the victims, (need) to have reform and renewal and in the church and let’s get on with it.’”

Like St. Maximilian Kolbe, “we do our best to keep our faith, hope and love in the midst of tough times,” Cardinal Dolan concluded.

Catholic bishops around the state issued statements about the new “window” opening Aug. 14, including Bishop Edward B. Scharfenberger of Albany.

“All of us in the Diocese of Albany – and in the church worldwide – will face challenges in the months ahead and may

even become dispirited as revelations of sexual abuse come forward in light of the Child Victims Act," he said.

"Although we cannot know the extent of what is before us, we do know that we will be a different church when this process is over, but we will be a better church because of it," Bishop Scharfenberger said. "The truth is the only way through this, and the truth will set us free."

He added, "We admire the bravery of those who have come forward to share their stories of betrayal and pain to help other survivors of childhood sexual abuse."