

High court declines to hear two church cases: An Episcopal dispute and a Catholic scandal

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On the opening day of the U.S. Supreme Court's fall term, the high court announced that it will not intervene in two prominent church-state cases, one involving a Catholic diocese in Connecticut and the other a former Episcopal parish in southern California.

In the latter case, the high court on October 5 declined to hear an appeal from St. James Anglican Church in Newport Beach. A majority of its members split from the Episcopal Church in 2004 and aligned themselves with the Anglican Province of Uganda after an openly gay man was elected bishop of New Hampshire.

Praising the "insight" of the high court, Episcopal bishop Jon Bruno of Los Angeles indicated that the diocese still hopes that the majority at St. James and a few other breakaway parishes will seek reconciliation.

The diocese hopes to "live out its traditional mission of welcoming people who hold a diversity of opinion while remaining united in common prayer," Bruno said.

Separately, the Supreme Court ended a legal battle in Connecticut that had dragged on since 2002. The Diocese of Bridgeport has fought to block the release of more than 12,000 pages of depositions and court records related to sexually abusive clergy. Four newspapers sued for access to the documents, which Connecticut courts have agreed should be open to the public.

Journalists and many Catholics have said the records may shed light on how recently retired New York cardinal Edward Egan handled the allegations when he was Bridgeport bishop.

The diocese had specifically petitioned Justice Antonin Scalia, a Catholic, to keep the documents closed until the high court had heard its appeal on the constitutionality

of the release order. That appeal is still pending, but legal analysts say it now appears unlikely that the Supreme Court will take it up.

The diocese argued that the court order poses a risk to all churches' First Amendment rights and that "the content of the sealed documents soon to be released has already been extensively reported on."

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops backed the Bridgeport diocese, saying that "we must remain vigilant against the risk that court-enforced avenues for the legitimate disclosure of documents are not abused."

The Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, however, said the "records will help parishioners and the public learn who helped to conceal clergy sex crimes, and which of those wrongdoers are still in positions of power." *-Religion News Service*