

EDITORIAL

A Window for Justice

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For decades, priests who preyed sexually on children did so with shocking ease and impunity. Their superiors acted as functional accomplices, shuttling abusive priests among parishes and buying or bullying victims into silence. Shame and guilt did the rest, burying abuses under a shroud of secrecy that often far outlasted the statute of limitations for prosecutions or lawsuits.

Those victims deserve a day in court. The New York Legislature should grant it to them, by passing a bill that would temporarily lift the statute of limitations for civil lawsuits involving the sexual abuse of children.

The bill would open a one-year window during which accusers would be allowed to sue in civil court, no matter how old the case. After a year, the statute of limitations would be restored, but an accuser would have up to 10 years after turning 18 to make a claim, instead of five. The statute of limitations for criminal prosecutions would not be changed.

Like similar measures in Delaware and California, the Child Victims Act seeks to balance the need for reasonable time limits for lawsuits against the unusual challenges in uncovering sexual crimes against children.

It can take decades before victims are ready to make the wrenching decision to tell their stories.

Add to that problem the particulars of the priest abuse scandal. It had its roots in the 1960s and 70s, but did not engulf the Catholic Church — which systematically covered up for the criminals in its clergy — until 2002, when its many victims were in their 30s or older.

The bill does not explicitly target any institution. Catholic and Orthodox Jewish officials are lobbying against it, arguing that it is unfair to allow decades-old accusations against old men who are ill equipped to defend themselves when evidence is lost or forgotten and witnesses are dead. They also, naturally, fear a wave of expensive settlements and damage awards like the one that struck the Los Angeles Archdiocese when the statute of limitations was lifted under a 2003 law.

Those fairness concerns are vastly outweighed by the need to dispense fairness to those who were powerless to seek it. Exposing abuse is also a matter of public safety. It is

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wrong to allow the institutional shame of the Catholic Church to remain hidden in church files and in the anguished hearts of victims. Their continued suffering and the prevention of future abuses are the strongest arguments for passage of the Child Victims Act.

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