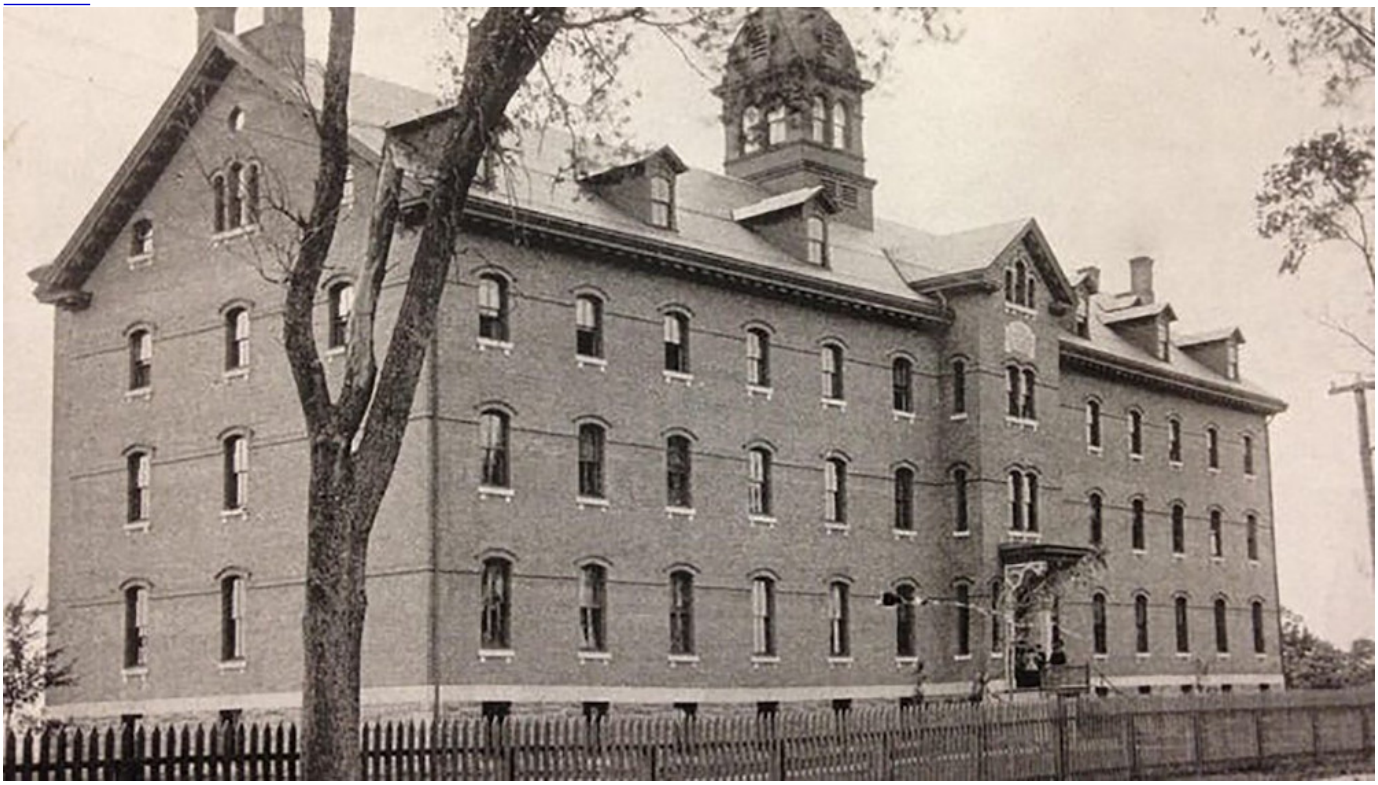
News



This undated historic photo shows St. Joseph's Orphanage in Burlington, Vt. (CNS photo/courtesy Preservation Burlington)

Cori Fugere Urban

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Burlington, Vt. — December 15, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Vermont Attorney General T.J. Donovan Dec. 14 released the results of an investigation into allegations of abuse and murder at the former St. Joseph's Orphanage in Burlington.

The report is "substantially consistent with the outcomes of the previous investigation ... that took place in the 1990s," according to a joint statement from Vermont Catholic Charities and the Diocese of Burlington. "Most notably, the present task force found no evidence of alleged murders that were committed by the Sisters of Charity of Providence."

A task force Donovan and the city of Burlington launched led the investigation beginning in 2018 after a Buzzfeed article in which former orphans claimed they had suffered abuse while in the care of the orphanage.

Buzzfeed also reported that a former resident allegedly witnessed the death of a child pushed by a sister from an upper window at the orphanage.

The task force's mission was to achieve a public accounting of child abuse and to explore whether any of these allegations rose to the level of criminal prosecution.

The orphanage was first operated by the Montreal-based Sisters of Charity of Providence and then by Vermont Catholic Charities Inc. until it closed in 1974.

"Our hope is that this report will finally lay to rest these allegations of murder against the sisters," the statement said.

Advertisement

It notes that "Vermont Catholic Charities has fully cooperated with the criminal task force, providing access to hundreds and hundreds of records as well as countless hours of staff time to facilitate onsite meetings with representatives of the task force."

Though "there was a complete failure by the system, including both child protective services and the criminal justice process — the state, its laws and its institutions — to safeguard the children," there was "apparently very little, if any, oversight by the diocese or the state," the statement said.

More than 13,000 children had been placed at the Burlington orphanage for periods ranging from a few days to two decades.

Since his appointment as bishop of Burlington six years ago, Bishop Christopher J. Coyne has met with numerous survivors of clergy abuse as well as former residents of the orphanage and their families at their request; he will continue to do so.

"The diocese continues to accept its full share of the blame for any sins of the past. We apologize for all hurt caused and for the personal shortcomings of human beings that came before us," the joint statement said.

"There is much that is troubling and horrible to read in the report," it said. "The report reiterates clear testimony of claims of physical and sexual abuse of some children that lived at St. Joseph's before it closed. We can never apologize enough to any survivors of abuse."

The Diocese of Burlington has a victim assistance coordinator to assist in bringing about healing, justice and peace for those suffering from abuse perpetrated by the religious, clergy or others employed by the orphanage or the diocese.