News



by James Dearie

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A Saginaw, Michigan, diocesan priest, previously cleared of accusations of sexual abuse of a minor, has been caught in a police sting operation and charged with criminal sexual conduct.

Fr. Robert DeLand, 71, pastor of St. Agnes Parish in Freeland, Michigan, was arrested Feb. 25 after a 21-year-old man and a 17-year-old boy complained about sexual misconduct by the priest.

The 17-year-old boy, who had been serving court-ordered community service under DeLand's supervision, agreed to cooperate with police in an undercover operation, which ultimately resulted in the priest's arrest, local television station WNEM reported Feb. 26.

DeLand was indicted on two counts of attempt to commit second degree criminal sexual conduct and gross indecency for the 21-year-old's allegations, and one count of criminal sexual conduct in the second degree for the 17-year-old's.

When reports of the arrest first came out, the diocese claimed that it had no previous knowledge of DeLand's behavior, issuing a statement that said "To the best of our knowledge, Father DeLand has not been subject to disciplinary action or accusations of priestly misconduct."

However, the diocese issued a new statement a few days later, saying that in 2005 a woman had raised the possibility that her brother, who committed suicide in 1993, may have been one of DeLand's victims.

"In 2005, after an independent professional investigator completed a thorough assessment, the independent Diocesan Review Board, Bishop Robert Carlson, who was Bishop of Saginaw at the time, as well as the family agreed that the suspicion against Father DeLand was unfounded," the latest statement, dated March 8, said, adding that it uncovered no evidence of previous accusations against DeLand.

The diocese's March 8 statement also revealed that DeLand had written in 1992 to Bishop Kenneth Untener, then bishop of Saginaw, referencing rumors damaging to DeLand's reputation. In the letter, "Father DeLand stated he took issue with the rumors and denied wrongdoing," the March 8 statement said.

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WNEM reported March 1 that Saginaw Bishop Joseph Cistone has told DeLand that he is not permitted to wear a collar or present himself as a priest while the case is ongoing. He is required by the state to wear a GPS tether, and to have no contact with anyone under the age of 21.

Since DeLand's arrest, several more accusers have come forward with allegations, not only against him, but also "nearly a half-dozen other clergy," Saginaw News reported March 2.

Brian Berg, a detective in Tittabawassee Township, Michigan, in which the community of Freeland is located, told the paper that he has not confirmed any of the accusations against the other priests or passed his findings to the diocese yet, but that a full investigation would be coming. "I assure you, we'll leave no stone unturned," he said.

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