News



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A judge ruled Jan. 31 that The Associated Press may be heard in a court dispute over whether to release hundreds of confidential emails that detail the New Orleans Saints' behind-the-scenes public relations work to help area Roman Catholic leaders deal with a sexual abuse crisis.

The news organization filed a motion urging the release of the emails, which surfaced in a lawsuit against the Archdiocese of New Orleans but remain confidential, calling them a matter of public interest. That request was opposed by the archdiocese and the Saints, who argued the communications were private.

Judge Ellen Hazeur of Orleans Parish Civil District Court agreed the emails were of “public concern” and ordered a special master to determine next month whether the documents should be made public. That hearing was scheduled for Feb. 20.

Mary Ellen Roy, an attorney for the AP, told reporters after the hearing that Louisiana law is clear on the issue of whether the news organization may be heard in court. She called the emails “an issue of extraordinary interest” for the heavily Catholic community, adding it’s also “important for the victims and advocates.”

The Saints maintain their public relations work for the church in 2018 and 2019 was minimal, dealing mostly with “messaging” and managing media inquiries around the archdiocese's release of its list of 57 credibly accused clergy.

But attorneys for about two dozen men suing the church say the emails show Saints executives doing damage control for the archdiocese and even helping select which names to include on the list of credibly accused clergy.

"This case does not involve intensely private individuals who are dragged into the spotlight,” the AP argued in a court filing, “but well-known mega-institutions that collect millions of dollars from local residents to support their activities.”

While the Saints opposed the AP's motion, the team has said it does not object to the 276 documents being made public at a later stage in the litigation. An attorney for the NFL team objected to some of the confidential materials being filed into the record Friday.

"Neither the Saints nor any of their personnel have anything to hide," the team said in a statement.

The Saints have close ties to the archdiocese, and New Orleans Archbishop Gregory Aymond is close a close friend of team owner Gayle Benson, who inherited the Saints and the New Orleans Pelicans basketball team when her husband, Tom Benson, died in 2018.

Gayle Benson also has given millions of dollars to Catholic institutions in the New Orleans area, and the archbishop is a regular guest of hers at games and charitable events for the church.

The emails surfaced in a lawsuit against the archdiocese over its employment of George F. Brignac, a longtime schoolteacher and deacon who was removed from the ministry in 1988 after a 7-year-old boy accused him of fondling him at a Christmas party.

Attorneys for the men suing the church contend the team's involvement in the sexual abuse crisis has been inappropriate. They filed court papers saying the Saints "should not be in the business of assisting the archdiocese, and the Saints' public relations team is not in the business of managing the public relations of criminals engaged in pedophilia."

The NFL has not commented on whether the Saints' involvement in the matter is appropriate.

The Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests on Friday called on league commissioner Roger Goodell to fine Benson and speak out in support of clergy abuse victims.

"Less than a week out from the NFL's premier event, a storm in Louisiana is disrupting what should be a celebration of another season," the group wrote in the letter. "As survivors of clergy sexual abuse and advocates for survivors, we are turning to you to help weather these recent events."

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