News



This Dec. 1, 2012 file photo shows a silhouette of a crucifix and a stained glass window inside a Catholic Church in New Orleans. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)

Jim Mustian

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

New Orleans — September 8, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A state grand jury has charged a now-91-year-old disgraced priest with sexually assaulting a teenage boy in 1975, an extraordinary prosecution that could shed new light on what Roman Catholic Church leaders knew about a child sex abuse crisis that persisted for decades and claimed hundreds of victims.

The priest, Lawrence Hecker, has been at the center of state and federal investigations of clergy sex abuse and a deepening scandal over why church leaders failed to report his admissions to law enforcement even as they permitted him to work around children until he quietly left the ministry in 2002. It wasn't until 2018 that the Archdiocese of New Orleans publicly identified Hecker as a suspected predator when it released its list of "credibly accused" priests.

Hecker faces felony counts of rape, kidnapping, aggravated crime against nature and theft. He is accused of choking the teen unconscious under the guise of performing a wrestling move and sexually assaulting him.

Reached by telephone Sept. 7, Hecker declined to talk about the charges. His attorney, Eugene Redmann, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The indictment comes amid a years-old legal battle over a trove of secret church records that were shielded by a sweeping confidentiality order after the archdiocese sought Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2020 amid a flood of abuse claims. The records are said to chronicle years of such claims, interviews with accused clergy and a pattern of church leaders transferring problem priests without reporting their crimes to law enforcement.

The AP reported last year that the documents, including a deposition of Hecker, have drawn the attention of the FBI and federal prosecutors, who are considering federal charges against priests accused of taking children across state lines to molest them. The Guardian recently reported the church files on Hecker include a written confession and other explosive documents suggesting the last four archbishops of New Orleans had reason to believe he was a child molester.

The current archbishop, 73-year-old Gregory Aymond, has rebuffed calls by clergy abuse survivors to step down, saying he would not do so until canonically required to when he turns 75. Aymond did not respond to a request for comment.

"He should have been prosecuted a long time ago," Jason Williams, the Orleans Parish district attorney, told reporters Sept. 7. "We've had to fight very vigorously in the courts and behind the scenes."

The alleged victim's attorneys called the indictment a "victory for all victim-survivors of clergy sexual abuse."

"Lawrence Hecker got away with grotesque sexual felonies against children for many decades under the protection of the Archdiocese of New Orleans," attorneys Richard Trahant, Soren Gisleson and John Denenea said in a joint statement. "Our client and several other Hecker victims whom we represent believe that he should spend the rest of his life in prison where he should have been for at least the last 60 years."

Advertisement

New claims against Hecker have surfaced as recently as this year. One alleged victim filed court papers in February claiming Hecker in 1983 forced him and other altar boys to strip naked so he could "inspect" them inside the changing room of St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church. "He then proceeded to fondle my genitals as well as the other boys in the line," the now 48-year-old man wrote.

That claim echoed the account of another survivor, Aaron Hebert, who says Hecker abused him in the late 1960s when he was an eighth-grader at St. Joseph's Catholic elementary school outside New Orleans. Hebert has said Hecker groped him and several classmates while purporting to demonstrate "what a hernia examination would be like" for those interested in playing sports.

"It was all swept under the rug," Hebert wrote in a letter to a federal judge. "In my opinion, the Archdiocese of New Orleans is morally bankrupt, not financially bankrupt."

A New Orleans native, Hecker was ordained as an archdiocesan priest in 1958. Court records indicate he was relocated at least 10 times to various parishes despite repeated red flags, his own admissions and an undisputed complaint of child molestation made in the late 1980s.

"Even after Father Hecker made monumental admissions in 1988 and again in 1999, the archdiocese failed to report him to any authorities," attorneys for Hecker's

alleged victims wrote in a court filing.

The sheer age of the Hecker case presents legal and evidentiary hurdles for prosecutors, who also face the political sensitivity of prosecuting a longtime clergyman in heavily Catholic New Orleans. Many predator priests have escaped criminal consequences in Louisiana for those reasons.

A notable exception came in 2019, when prosecutors filed a first-degree rape charge against George F. Brignac, a longtime deacon and schoolteacher who faced a flood of sex abuse claims. That prosecution also involved a former altar boy who said he was sexually assaulted repeatedly in the 1970s. Brignac died in 2020 while awaiting trial at the age of 85.

Litigation involving Brignac turned up thousands of emails documenting behind-the-scenes public relations work that New Orleans Saints executives did for the archdiocese in 2018 and 2019 to contain fallout from clergy abuse scandals. Like the other secret church records, those emails remain under lock and key today.

"If the church truly wants to clean up the wreckage of the past, it needs to detail every transfer of known abusers, why and how it happened," said Mike McDonnell, interim executive director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "They must be fully accountable for the decades in a victim's life that could have been totally different had church officials taken care of the wounded sheep instead of the abusive shepherd."

[Associated Press writer Kevin McGill contributed to this report.]