News



Bishop J. Douglas Deshotel of Lafayette, La., retired Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes of New Orleans and other U.S. bishops arrive to concelebrate Mass in the crypt of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Dec. 5, 2019. Deshotel recently excommunicated a deacon who opted to formally leave the Catholic Church, citing his struggles trusting the church after a priest sexually abused his son. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Gina Christian

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

March 25, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A permanent deacon in the Diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana, whose then-teenage son was molested by the priest he once served alongside, is now excommunicated after leaving his ministry, because he formally left the Catholic Church, according to the recent decree written by his bishop.

"I'm very surprised — I assumed at some point that they would possibly laicize me, but excommunication ... that thought never crossed my mind," Deacon Scott Peyton, who was ordained in 2012 and had served until December 2023, told OSV News. He provided OSV News a digital copy of the March 13 letter he had received from Bishop J. Douglas Deshotel of Lafayette.

The document — printed on the bishop's letterhead, signed by both Deshotel and the diocesan chancellor, and marked with the diocesan seal — acknowledged Peyton's Dec. 4, 2023, email stating what the deacon called his intention to resign from the diaconate and leave the Catholic Church.

"The pain and suffering endured by the victims (of clergy sexual abuse), our family, and most importantly our son, coupled with what appears to be a systemic failure in addressing and preventing such heinous acts, have left me disillusioned and unable to reconcile my commitment to the Church with my conscience," Peyton wrote.

In his decree, Deshotel said that Peyton had "de iure" been removed from all ecclesiastical offices. The bishop declared Peyton "irregular for the exercise of the sacred order of the diaconate," according to canons 1044 and 1041, and removed his faculties to function as a cleric. The bishop added he would inform the Vatican's Dicastery for Clergy "and await further guidance."

Deshotel said he "must also sadly declare" that Peyton had "incurred the 'latae sententiae' censure of excommunication," effective on the day the deacon received the bishop's letter.

OSV News placed multiple requests March 21 and 22 for comment from the Diocese of Lafayette on Peyton's excommunication and is awaiting a response.

Unlike a "ferendae sententiae" canonical penalty, which is not binding until it is formally imposed on an offender, a "latae sententiae" excommunication is "incurred automatically upon the commission of an offense" specifically prohibited under canon law, such as apostasy, heresy, schism and abortion.

Deshotel said the excommunication had been "in keeping with the earliest Councils of the Church" citing canon 1364.1 and the deacon's "written decision ... to 'sever' ties with the Catholic Church."

A canon lawyer, speaking on condition of anonymity as he was not familiar with the full details of Peyton's case, told OSV News that a Catholic formally joining a non-Catholic church would thereby commit an act of schism and trigger the automatic "latae sententiae" excommunication prescribed under canon 1364.

Writing on Facebook March 17, Peyton shared that on Jan. 21, 2024, "we officially joined Trinity Anglican Church!" He included a photo of himself along with family members standing before the altar of the Anglican church, which is located in Lafayette.

Trinity Anglican Church's pastor, the Rev. Dr. Peter Johnston, confirmed their profession, telling OSV News by email that "the Peyton family was formally received into the Anglican Church by our Bishop on Sunday, January 21st."

Peyton told OSV News his family's move to Trinity Anglican Church — which is an hour's drive from their home — was an effort to "go somewhere we weren't known and that wasn't the Catholic Church, just to be able to get rooted back in being Christ-centered and to be focused on our own healing spiritually."

The deacon said in his Dec. 4 letter that "the magnitude of these revelations [of clergy sexual abuse] has deeply shaken my faith and trust in the institution to which I have dedicated a significant portion of my life.

"This decision is not a rejection of my faith in God or my commitment to living a life guided by Christian principles," Deacon Peyton wrote. "Instead, it reflects a conscientious objection to the way the Church has handled cases of sexual abuse, and a desire to distance myself from an institution that, currently, falls short of the

values it professes."

Peyton told OSV News that Deshotel had personally replied to him by email Dec. 5, 2023 — a digital copy of which OSV News has obtained — saying he was "sad" to receive the news and promising to remember Peyton during his prayers and Masses.

Advertisement

"Sacramentally, you are a Deacon though you choose not to exercise your ministry," said the bishop in the email. "Please feel free to call if I can ever be of assistance."

Peyton said he was "very pleased" with the bishop's Dec. 5 response, which he called "pastoral." But since then, Deacon Peyton said, he "hadn't heard a word from him (BDeshotel) or anyone else until … I got the (March 13) letter in the mail."

In 2018, Peyton's son Oliver revealed that he had been molested as a 16-year-old three years earlier by Father Michael Guidry, the pastor at the time of St. Peter Catholic Church in Morrow, Louisiana. Oliver Peyton stated the priest had plied him with alcohol at St. Peter's rectory and molested him while he was incapacitated. Oliver Peyton's name was disclosed in a 2018 lawsuit and has appeared in several media accounts of the proceedings, along with his image.

In March 2019, Guidry pleaded guilty to child molestation, having previously claimed he could not recall the abuse, and later asserting the teen had consumed his own alcohol and had initiated the sexual contact. The priest was sentenced the following month to seven years in prison, along with three years of probation, according to media reports.

Now 81, Guidry was briefly released on an emergency appeal during the COVID-19 pandemic, and later returned to prison with his request for early release unanimously denied by the state's parole board in August 2021.

In a 2019 interview with local media, Peyton's wife, Letitia Peyton, said her family had known Father Guidry "for 12 years."

She said, "He gave the sacraments to our kids. Scott stood next to him as he consecrated the Eucharist every Sunday, and yet, (Guidry) knew what he did to our son."

The family settled a civil lawsuit against the Diocese of Lafayette in April 2021, with the diocese issuing a statement on May 7, 2021, saying it had found the allegations against Guidry credible and formally apologizing to the family.

Guidry appears on the diocese's list of credibly accused priests.

The timing of his decision to leave the diaconate and the church is something "I'm probably still working through," said Peyton, a former child welfare specialist and parole officer who serves as a regional and state director for Right On Crime, a national campaign of the Texas Public Policy Foundation that seeks conservative criminal justice reforms.

"I don't think there's just one particular thing ... in all honesty, it's something I probably should have done from day one, after my son came forward (about the abuse)," Peyton told OSV News. "But I wanted to give everything a chance. ... We tried to go through the motions of going to Mass, continuing to be a deacon and be active in ministry."

But "as the years went on," Peyton said, he watched his son "have good days and bad days." He also was seeing "our family beginning to lose faith in God," with the "institution of the church ... basically tearing our faith apart."

Peyton said that had the abuse not taken place within the church, "if anything traumatic had happened to our family, we would have been talking with the priests ... (and) church members, relying on our spiritual ability to pull us through things.

"When the church causes that hurt, it's so hard to do it," Peyton said. "I came to a point where I didn't see the diocese learning from what had happened to our son."

In his March 13 decree, Deshotel wrote, "A bishop never wishes to communicate a censure to anyone.

"I am aware that your family has suffered a trauma but the answer does not lie in leaving the Most Holy Eucharist," he continued. "We are not Catholics because the Church on earth is perfect but because the Lord has entrusted us to a mystery greater than ourselves, which He established as the means to our salvation."

"The censures of the Church," he added, "are intended to be medicinal, perhaps as much for those who impose them as for those who are subject to them. It is with this objective that I mournfully must declare them."

A version of this story appeared in the **April 12-25, 2024** print issue under the headline: After his son's abuse, a deacon left the Catholic Church. Now he's excommunicated.