News



The steeples of St. Elizabeth of Hungary Church in Cleveland (Dennis Sadowski)



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The diocesan priest at the center of the controversial destruction of a historic Vatican II altar at a parish in Cleveland's Buckeye neighborhood was on leave from the priesthood for a decade following allegations that he "groomed" and attempted to sexually abuse a teenager, before being reinstated to ministry in 2012.

Fr. Jeffery Weaver initially asked for the leave in 2002, as reporting on the sexual abuse crisis peaked and he had admitted to an inappropriate sexual advance toward a young man.

Cleveland Bishop Richard Lennon reinstated Weaver to active ministry in 2012. No explanation was given at the time of reinstatement. Lennon died in 2019.

The Cleveland Diocese's website shows that since May 2012 Weaver has been "awaiting assignment."

Nancy Fishburn, diocesan executive director of communications, confirmed in an April 9 email to National Catholic Reporter that Weaver "does not currently have a parish assignment, and there are no plans to assign him to a parish in the future."

She declined to respond to additional inquiries about where Weaver is currently ministering and his responsibilities within the diocese. Weaver did not respond to email requests for comment about the allegations sent through the diocese.

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Weaver sought the leave of absence in 2002 as the clergy sexual abuse scandal peaked, according to a television report that aired in November 2012 by investigative reporter Bill Sheil of station WJW-TV in Cleveland. Although the video for Sheil's report is no longer available online, it was summarized at length at the time by the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP).

Shiel had obtained documents from the Lake County prosecutor's office, which was investigating the priest for alleged sexual abuse.

NCR attempted to obtain the documents from the prosecutor's office, filing a request on April 4. However, David Hackman Jr., chief assistant prosecutor of the civil division, said May 2 the file on Weaver had been sealed by a Cuyahoga County

judge. Hackman said he could not provide additional details about the investigation of Weaver or the decision to seal the file.

According to the SNAP summary, Sheil reported in 2012 that the documents revealed that in 1996 Weaver had bought the teenager "a large number of alcoholic drinks" and "then tried to French kiss him" as the victim pushed him away.

The file included, the summary states, a 1997 memo by Fr. John Wright, who had served the diocese in various administrative capacities, saying that Weaver "often talked about the sex in the seminary he attended," and admitted to young people that he is gay "and is available in a sexual way to them."

The memo said that Weaver's actions seemed to follow a pattern in that he was "waiting until they are 18 years of age, not [a] child, however, this is an example of sexual exploitation."

Another memo from Auxiliary Bishop James Quinn to Bishop Anthony Pilla, both of Cleveland and both deceased, said Weaver "admits one regretful advance" toward the man and that "something would have happened if Fr. Weaver had acted out his initial compulsion."

Weaver's role in the diocese was questioned after he was seen in late January by a security guard twice over the course of two hours to be directing the dismantling of an altar used for the *novus ordo* in St. Elizabeth of Hungary Shrine on Cleveland's east side.

Related: A Latin Mass community moved in. Then wrecked a historic Vatican II altar.

The altar is of particular value to members of Cleveland's Catholic Hungarian-American community. The church where it was located was known as St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish until last July. The parish was founded in 1892 as the first parish in the Western Hemisphere for the Hungarian diaspora.

The altar was built in 1966 by the parish's pastor at the time to accommodate the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Hungarian Cardinal József Mindszenty celebrated Mass at the altar during a 1974 visit to the parish. Pope Francis declared the cardinal venerable in 2019, which would make the altar a second-class relic if Mindszenty is canonized a saint.

The altar dismantlement occurred following the formal welcome by Cleveland Bishop Edward Malesic of the Chicago-based Institute of Christ the King Sovereign Priest, which since July has been establishing its presence at St. Elizabeth for Latin Mass adherents. Malesic at the same time merged the parish with another Hungarian parish across town, but allowed St. Elizabeth of Hungary parishioners to use the church for baptisms, weddings, funerals and special events.

Parishioners have expressed concern and anger not just with the destruction of the altar, but other actions undertaken without notification to alter the symbols of Hungarian ethnic traditions and Vatican II reforms.

Weaver has been celebrating the Latin Mass on weekdays and assisting institute priests at Mass on weekends.

A livestream of a March 1 Mass, still available on YouTube on May 8, showed Weaver celebrating a Latin Mass with two young Mass servers at his side.

Fishburn, the diocesan spokeswoman, declined to answer questions about whether the diocese had informed the institute or worshippers at the church of Weaver's background and what, if any monitoring of his activities was in place.

Neither St. Elizabeth rector Fr. James Hoogerwerf — who uses the title "canon," as the institute designates its priest leaders — nor Fr. Matthew Talarico, the institute's provincial superior in Chicago, responded to multiple emails and calls about Weaver's involvement at the shrine and the allegations against him.

A version of this story appeared in the **May 6-June 6, 2024** print issue under the headline: Cleveland priest at center of Vatican II altar damage previously accused of abuse.