News



Bishop Barry C. Knestout of Richmond, Va., is seen in this 2019 file photo. A Virginia pastor, Father Rob Cole, was removed from his parish, St. John the Apostle in Virginia Beach June 12, 2024, by Bishop Knestout following concerns over the priest's handling of abuse allegations against a parishioner who also was a school parent. (OSV News/Ian West, courtesy Diocese of Richmond)

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Richmond, Va. — June 14, 2024
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A Virginia pastor has been removed from his parish following concerns over his handling of abuse allegations against a parishioner who was also a school parent.

Father Rob Cole was dismissed effective June 12 from St. John the Apostle Parish in Virginia Beach by Bishop Barry C. Knestout of Richmond.

In a June 12 media release, the Diocese of Richmond said that Knestout had "determined that St. John the Apostle parish would benefit from new pastoral leadership."

Cole had been placed on temporary leave in May after allegations emerged that an adult parishioner — later named as Vincent Jakawich — had reportedly molested two students at St. John the Apostle School a few years earlier.

Jakawich, a former Navy lieutenant and pilot, was found dead in North Carolina, having taken his own life shortly after the parents of a St. John the Apostle student publicly stated their daughter had disclosed being sexually abused by him a few years earlier.

School principal Miriam Cotton issued a May 10 letter clarifying that the alleged incidents did not take place on school grounds, while superintendent Michael Riley stated on May 17 that civil authorities and law enforcement had been notified.

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In a separate case, Jakawich had pleaded guilty in 2022 to a misdemeanor assault and battery, a charge downgraded from a 2020 felony of aggravated sexual battery involving a child under 13. He was not sentenced to active jail time.

In bond documents from 2021 related to that case, legal counsel for Jakawich had requested he be allowed on the campus of St. John's school "where his daughters are students."

However, the parents of the alleged victim in the most recent case told local media they found it "shocking" Jakawich still had apparent access to school grounds.

The diocese said in its statement that Bishop Knestout "expresses his sorrow and compassion to the victims and their families affected by this tragic situation and applauds the courage it took to come forward."

The bishop also expressed his appreciation for "Father Cole's dedication and service as the pastor to this community for more than 15 years," and for "the patience and support of the community."

Father Esteban De Leon, pastor of Star of the Sea Catholic Church in Virginia Beach, will continue to serve as St. John's temporary administrator until a new pastor is assigned in the near future, said the diocese.