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St. Michael Church in Fall River, Massachusetts, is seen in a photo taken June 27, 2024. (OSV

St. Michael Church in Fall River, Massachusetts, is seen in a photo taken June 27, 2024. (OSV News/Brian Fraga)

Gina Christian

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June 28, 2024

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A Massachusetts priest has been placed on administrative leave, following allegations of sexual misconduct involving an apparent adult victim — while an attorney for a separate alleged adult victim accused the diocese of having engaged in a "cover up" regarding the priest.

Bishop Edgar da Cunha of Fall River, Massachusetts, recently informed parishioners of St. Michael and St. Joseph parishes in Fall River that their joint pastor, Fr. Jay Mello, is under investigation due to "concerning information" the diocese had received about possible sexual misconduct.

The bishop's letter announcing the news was shared during the parishes' June 22-23 weekend Masses.

According to a June 23 statement by the diocese, "there are no allegations of inappropriate conduct with minors" in Mello's case.

The diocese said an initial inquiry "found that there is sufficient evidence to warrant further investigation to determine whether Father Mello has violated the standards of ministerial behavior and the Code of Conduct for Priests."

While on administrative leave, Mello "is no longer residing at the parish rectory and has been directed to refrain from exercising public priestly ministry."

The diocese noted Mello "has denied the allegations of priestly misconduct and is entitled to the presumption of innocence until the investigation is complete and a final determination is made."

The statement encouraged "anyone with concerns regarding the conduct of any priest, staff, or volunteer affiliated with the diocese" to contact law enforcement and/or the diocese's safe environment and victim assistance director.

OSV News has reached out to \Mello by email for comment, but did not receive an immediate response.

OSV News has also contacted the Diocese of Fall River to clarify the specific restrictions placed upon the priest.

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As of June 27, Mello was listed on both the St. Michael and St. Joseph parishes' websites as their pastor.

But Boston-based attorney Mitchell Garabedian told reporters that allegations against Mello are far from unprecedented.

On June 26, Garabedian participated remotely in a press conference held outside the Diocese of Fall River's offices, claiming Mello "took advantage ... sexually" of his unnamed male client in 2013. Garabedian's client — who is not involved in the recent allegations against the priest — was 28 years old at the time.

Garebedian said his client had met Mello in the early 2010s at the former Sacred Hearts Retreat Center in Wareham, Massachusetts, and had shared with the priest —

who is a 1998 graduate of a high school culinary arts program — a "common interest" in cooking.

The attorney said that in 2013, Mello had allegedly invited the man to discuss the topic of cooking at the rectory at St. Francis Xavier in Acushnet, Massachusetts, where the priest was filling in while still assigned to St. Patrick Church in Falmouth, Massachusetts (now part of St. Joseph, Guardian of the Holy Family Parish in Falmouth).

The alleged abuse took place at the rectory, said Garabedian, adding, "There was no consent in this sexual relationship. It was a violent incident ... and my client fled."

Garabedian told OSV News the alleged incident qualified as a "criminal sexual offense," and that his client had reported it to the Acushnet Police Department.

OSV News has requested confirmation from the police department of the complaint and is awaiting a response.

Garabedian also told OSV News that shortly after the alleged sexual assault, his client had met with now-deceased Bishop George Coleman, then bishop of the Fall River Diocese.

"And my client was ignored after that," Garabedian said. "The bishop was very quiet, and he just listened and he did not say anything."

Garabedian said Coleman "did nothing" after that.

"Common sense would dictate that an investigation should have been conducted back then, in 2013," he said.

Ten years later, said Garabedian, his client — who had since become "aware of other victims" — approached the diocese again, this time under da Cunha, about Mello.

The attorney added that his client has been "on an emotional rollercoaster" as a result of the alleged abuse, and is seeking "validation" of his experience as well as compensation from the diocese.

In response to the press conference, the Diocese of Fall River issued a June 26 statement saying that it was not able to provide additional information on the case during the ongoing investigation into Mello.

Once the inquiry has been completed, "all information including any allegations will be presented to the Ministerial Review Board for evaluation," said the diocese, referencing the independent, consultative body mandated by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.

"Upon its review and discussion of the information, the Review Board will offer recommendations to Bishop Edgar M. da Cunha … for a response to the allegations," said the diocese.