News



The Cincinnati skyline is pictured in a file photo. Father Barry Stechschulte, the former pastor of Holy Rosary Parish in St. Marys, Ohio, resigned following complaints from parishioners over his admitted effort to destroy evidence of adult and possible child pornography possession by a fellow priest. (OSV News/Aaron P. Bernstein, Reuters)

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Cincinnati — August 5, 2024

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A pastor of an Archdiocese of Cincinnati parish has resigned from his post following complaints from parishioners over his admitted effort to destroy evidence of a fellow priest's possession of pornographic images, including material that possibly involved the sexual abuse of children.

In a July 30 letter, Archbishop Dennis M. Schnurr of Cincinnati told members of St. Susanna Parish in Mason, Ohio, that he had accepted the resignation of Father Barry Stechschulte. The archbishop appointed retired archdiocesan priest Father Jeff Kemper as temporary administrator of the parish.

Schnurr's announcement followed a July 27 letter to Stechschulte from "Parents for Action" — a self-described "collective of parishioners and parents of St. Susanna" whose tagline is "protecting our children" — asking the priest to step down amid concerns about his ability to lead the parish, which operates a K-8 school, and to ensure safe environment protocols.

In a July 12 letter, Stechschulte had apologized to parishioners for his October 2012 decision as pastor of Holy Rosary Parish in St. Marys, Ohio, ordering Deacon Martin Brown to destroy a computer hard drive containing pornographic images. The computer had been used by the previous pastor, Father Anthony Cutcher.

Stechschulte reported the images to police six years later in September 2018 — a month after the release of the Pennsylvania grand jury report into widespread sexual abuse of children by clergy and its coverup in six dioceses — and advised law enforcement he had eliminated possible evidence. Brown told police that Stechschulte had initiated the 2018 police report after experiencing remorse over his actions at the time of the images' discovery.

In a subsequent message to parishioners posted on St. Susanna's website, Stechschulte said it had "become evident" to him "after much prayer and discernment" that he should resign "for the good of our parish and our school … to be reassigned elsewhere in the archdiocese."

"We acknowledge and appreciate the sincere regret you have expressed regarding the events of 2012, and we want to assure you that we forgive you," wrote the "Parents for Action" group in its letter. "However, this matter transcends forgiveness.

... The decision you made to destroy evidence instead of reporting it to the proper authorities has severely compromised the confidence many of us have in your leadership."

In a message shared July 18 on St. Susanna's Facebook page, the archdiocese said that Stechschulte, having discovered "inappropriate material" on the device at Holy Rosary, "was disgusted with the findings and to ensure no one else in the parish would be exposed, his reaction in the moment was to order the hard drive destroyed."

The archdiocese added, "As stated in Fr. Stechschulte's apology letter, he realized this was a terrible mistake which he regrets."

In addition, the archdiocese noted it had "reported this matter to law enforcement from the very beginning." According to its Facebook message, "Holy Rosary Parish" contacted the archdiocese 19 days after discovering the hard drive in 2012, and the archdiocese contacted the Auglaize County Prosecutor's Office the following day, and "no criminal charges were filed." However, the prosecutor's office has disputed ever receiving a report in 2012 from the archdiocese.

In a July 31 email to OSV News, the Archdiocese of Cincinnati said, "Fr. Anthony Cutcher resigned from active priestly ministry in April of 2021, following his resignation as pastor of Pastoral Region XII — St. Peter, Our Lady of the Rosary, Holy Cross and St. Adalbert Parishes — in February of 2021. He does not have an assignment and will not be returning to priestly ministry."

The archdiocese did not reply to OSV News' question about whether Cutcher had been laicized.

In a July 31 call with OSV News, Cutcher said he was not a member of the clergy, adding, "You cannot address me as 'Father.' ... I have no ministry at all."

He said he had "not yet" applied to be dismissed from the clerical state, although he said he is still a practicing Catholic.

Asked if the images found on the Holy Rosary computer were in fact pornographic images, and whether the images were of adults, children or both, Cutcher told OSV News, "I can't comment on that."

According to a September 2018 St. Marys Police Department report, both Brown and Stechschulte spoke with law enforcement about the images, with the former advising that Cutcher had downloaded male pornography on Holy Rosary Parish computers.

While Deacon Brown — who had removed the hard drive and seared it with a blow torch — told Detective Lucas Turpin the images he saw appeared to depict adults, Stechschulte claimed he had found one file folder on the machine containing pictures of shirtless preteen boys in what the report called "provocative poses."

The priest acknowledged to law enforcement that he should not have ruined the hard drive, and also noted that he had spoken directly with Cutcher at the time, who had explained the images by saying he was, as the police report said, "going through a bad time" and had since resolved his issues through counseling.

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Cutcher, who in 2018 was pastor of St. Peter Church in Huber Heights, Ohio (now part of St. Gabriel the Archangel Parish), repeated that claim to police, saying he only downloaded adult pornography from a legal site. Detective Turpin also noted in his report that Cutcher "stated that he thought this was all behind us and asked what good this could possibly do."

Police ultimately closed out the case due to insufficient evidence of child sexual abuse material, following forensic examinations of several other devices from Holy Rosary and from St. Peter.

Chief Jacob Sutton of St. Marys Police Department told OSV News that the differing testimonies offered by Brown and Stechschulte on whether the pornographic images depicted adults or the sexual abuse of children underscored the crucial importance of physical evidence in such investigations.

"Obviously, we don't know what the investigation would have been had we had that hard drive, because we had conflicting stories on what was on that computer or not," said Sutton. "Testimonial evidence is not the most trustworthy evidence out there. ... Physical evidence, especially in police work, is the evidence that typically does not lie. And unfortunately we didn't have the opportunity to examine that to see what the truth was, if (the images) were illegal or not, so that we could make a

determination if there was a crime that was committed or not."

While stressing that he did not believe either Brown or Stechschulte had been deliberately untruthful, Sutton noted that since "there was some question" about the images, "a law enforcement agency ... needs to be contacted" given its expertise and technology in identifying child sexual abuse material and its perpetrators.

The Archdiocese of Cincinnati told OSV News that in 2019 it had "retained an independent third-party firm to conduct an investigation into Father Cutcher's alleged possession of adult and/or child pornography" after the conclusion of the St. Marys Police Department investigation. While that investigation is complete, the archdiocese told OSV News it is "not disclosing the results."

Asked by OSV News if Brown had faced any disciplinary action for destroying the hard drive, the archdiocese said the question addressed "a personnel matter" for which information "will not be disclosed."

OSV News emailed Brown, who is listed as a facilities manager at Holy Rosary Church, but has not yet received a response.

In 2021, Cutcher was reported to the Archdiocese of Cincinnati for sending hundreds of text messages to a 14-year-old male student at St. Peter School over the course of a year and removed from ministry.

The contents of several messages — shared in an extensive investigative report by Paula Christian of WCPO, an ABC news affiliate in Cincinnati — include comments on the teen's appearance, inquiries about his "love life," professions of missing the youth and at least one request for a photo of the teen. One such message, in response to the boy saying his family had takeout from BJ's, said, "Oh the restaurant, I always think of something else when someone says BJ's ... I won't tell you the thing but the second word is 'job.' (Think below the belt)."

According to WCPO, the Montgomery County, Ohio, prosecutor's office investigated the matter but did not charge Cutcher. However, several in the prosecutor's office expressed concern that some of the texts did appear to be "inappropriate," and the priest's arrangement to meet daily with the boy in his office was "very disturbing on several levels, to say the least."

The day after Cutcher was placed on a leave of absence from St. Peter, the parish's school principal, Ron Albino, was found dead, having apparently taken his own life. The county prosecutor's records indicated Albino may have tipped off Cutcher about the complaint to the archdiocese, but authorities determined there was no information to open a criminal investigation into Albino's death, which was ruled a suicide.

During a 90-minute interview June 7 with WCPO, Cutcher said he had twice been under care at St. Luke Institute in Maryland, which provides psychological and spiritual treatment for clergy and religious.

However, Father Cutcher — who had served as board president of the National Federation of Priests' Councils — conceded in the interview that his desired return to the priesthood and ministry was now "going to be an impossibility."