News



Mark Richards lost his job at a Catholic school when it was revealed that his late spouse was a man. (The Guardian/X/WDSU)

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A longtime music teacher at a Catholic school in the New Orleans area recently lost his job when it was revealed to an evidently "disgruntled" parent that he was another man's widower, igniting a scandal within an archdiocese that has otherwise largely been occupied with trying to reorganize its finances in federal bankruptcy court after its clergymen spent decades sexually molesting children.

In an email to community members at the archdiocese-run school from which he was dismissed, Mark Richards explained that he had been fired because a parent notified officials about an obituary for his husband, who died of a heart attack in September 2023.



A wooden cross lies on a rainbow flag in this 2021 file photo. In an email to community members at the News Orleans Archdiocese school from which he was dismissed, Mark Richards said that he was fired because a parent notified officials about an obituary for his husband, who died in September 2023. (OSV News/KNA/Julia Steinbrecht)

Richards' email alluded to how his employment contract at St. Francis Xavier Catholic School in Metairie, Louisiana, contained a morality clause prohibiting educators from "contracting a marriage in violation of the rules of the Catholic

church" and "actively engaging in homosexual activity," along with other conduct that the document maintains is inconsistent with the teachings of the religion that does not permit same-sex matrimony within it.

He wrote that he signed the annually renewable contract and morality clause — which is required of all the archdiocese's teachers but historically has been far from universally enforced — with "a wink and a nudge since it was no big secret that I am gay." The St. Francis Xavier community was comfortable enough with his marriage to his husband, John Messinger, that "everyone at the school was very sympathetic and supportive" after his death.

But that changed when the parent who alerted local church officials to Messinger's obituary — which listed Richards as his husband — complained. He said he was fired on June 25 as music teacher and band director at St Francis after 21 years at the school, "and the reason for this termination is that I am a gay man."

"I have not been in violation of the morality clause for the last two years, and no one can find any incident of my acting inappropriately with anyone — let alone a student," added Richards, who met Messinger two years before he started working at St. Francis and then married him in 2014. Nonetheless, Richards said, all that his superiors would tell him was "you're fired" after a parent — whose identity was shielded and whom the teacher presumed to be "disgruntled" — reported discovering his being mentioned in Messinger's obituary, which was published nearly two years earlier.

As the New Orleans NBC affiliate WDSU reported on Friday, June 27, Richards' email garnered him sympathy from many parents at the school which ousted him. A parent-organized petition supporting Richards, calling his firing "unjust" and exalting him as "a beacon of kindness and understanding in [students'] lives," had collected about 1,500 signatures, the station and the Louisiana news outlet nola.com each noted.

One mother, Katheryn Lee, told WDSU: "I would like to see the morality clause change.

"I would like the line regarding homosexuality in the morality clause that educators sign to be removed," Lee said. "Your identity is not your morality. I hope we have a voice in this."

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A father named Rick English told the station he believed the morality clause at the center of Richards' dismissal was "a violation of human rights" that needed to be reviewed. "To me, it's a social injustice at this point," he remarked.

Both nola.com and WDSU reported that school administrators sent an email to the St. Francis community confirming it had not renewed Richards' employment contract while claiming, too, that he had not provided "a fully accurate description of the employment situation." But administrators said they could not elaborate, making a reference to unspecified legal considerations.

"This decision is final and will not be revisited," school officials' email also said, in part. "We strive to always make decisions that uphold the teachings of the Catholic faith that are in the best interest of our school."

Richards, meanwhile, had written to St. Francis parents: "Teaching your children has been one of the joys of my life, and I treasure the memories."

Still, as he put it to WDSU, Richards felt betrayed by those who opted to fire him.

"It's just a stab in the back," Richards reportedly said. "It's just time for this to stop. The rest of the free world does not think homosexuality is a big deal."

St. Francis is one of numerous Archdiocese of New Orleans affiliates that are being counted on to contribute to what is expected to be a nine-figure settlement resolving a bankruptcy protection case filed by archdiocesan leaders in 2020. Those officials made that chapter 11 bankruptcy filing mainly in an attempt to dispense with hundreds of clergy molestation claims dating back decades as affordably as possible.

As of Sunday, June 29, the most recent settlement offer was for the archdiocese, its affiliates and its insurers to pay between $180 million and $230 million to about 600 abuse survivors. But attorneys representing hundreds of those survivors oppose that deal, saying it is far less than the $323 million settlement approved in late 2024 in a similar case pitting about 600 clergy abuse claimants against the Archdiocese of Rockville Centre on Long Island, New York.

Any proposed settlement would need support from two-thirds of survivors who vote on it for it to gain approval.

This story was first published in The Guardian.