News

Pope Paul VI and Fr. Pedro Arrupe

Pope Paul VI is seen in an undated photo with Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe, superior general of the Jesuits from 1965 to 1983. Documents show that the beloved Jesuit, who died in 1991, knew of credible allegations of sexual abuse by a novice later ordained. (CNS/Courtesy Jesuits Global)

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New Orleans — July 24, 2025

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This story was first published in The Guardian.

Pedro Arrupe, the late, former worldwide leader of the Jesuit religious order and a candidate for Catholic sainthood, acknowledged in records produced as part of a New Orleans court case that he was warned that one of the group's aspiring priests

had been accused of sexually abusing two minors and acknowledged making sexual advances on a third.

The man was ultimately ordained and there is no indication in records in the court case in Louisiana that Arrupe took steps to prevent him from becoming a priest. The man was later accused of abusing other minors he met through his ministry.

Arrupe's involvement in the case of Donald Barkley Dickerson* — who died in 2016 at age 80 and two years later was confirmed by the Jesuits to be one of hundreds of their members against whom credible claims of sexual abuse of a minor had been made — had begun toward the end of the 1970s. But it has drawn new scrutiny in a lawsuit that accuses Dickerson of raping a 17-year-old student at Jesuit-run Loyola University New Orleans.

The case in Orleans Civil District Court, Louisiana, raises questions about whether Arrupe, a beloved figure whose name is on numerous prestigious awards and buildings at Jesuit institutions around the world, did as much as he could to protect those who trusted in his order.

Church officials in Rome in 2019 initiated the process to canonize Arrupe, who is known for having ministered to survivors of the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima at the end of World War II.

Dickerson joined the Jesuits in the 1970s and was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1980. Before joining the Jesuits, he was a brother of the Order of the Sacred Heart.

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The newly discovered records about Arrupe come as the broader global Catholic Church has been sending mixed signals about the urgency of addressing the clergy abuse scandal that has roiled it for decades. Pope Leo XIV said in June the church must "not tolerate any form of abuse — neither of power or authority, nor abuse of conscience, spiritual or sexual abuse."

Leo on July 5 appointed Archbishop Thibault Verny of Chambéry, France, to lead the Vatican's child protection advisory commission.

However, also in June in another part of France, the Archdiocese of Toulouse gave the high-ranking position of diocesan chancellor to a priest who served five years in

prison after being convicted of raping a 16-year-old boy in 1993. And a former Vatican diplomat who was convicted of possessing and distributing child pornography has been allowed to continue working as one of several clerks at the Vatican's Secretariat of State.

A spokesperson at the Jesuits' U.S. Central and Southern Province declined to comment on the Dickerson case, citing a policy against discussing pending litigation. Neither Loyola nor the Shreveport Diocese in Northwest Louisiana where Dickerson was assigned during the alleged campus rape immediately responded to requests for comment.

'A poor risk for ordination'

Arrupe, who served 18 years as the Jesuits' superior general beginning in 1965, was mailed a Dec. 20, 1977, letter detailing concerns about allegations that Dickerson had sexually abused minors.

The letter from Fr. Thomas Stahel, Arrupe's fellow Jesuit and at the time the top official — or provincial — of the Jesuit region that included New Orleans, said Dickerson had recently gone on a retreat where he "made sexual advances on [a] 14-year-old boy." The boy, a student at Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School in Indianapolis, told his parents — who in turn reported Dickerson to Stahel, the letter said.

Stahel said in the letter that he believed the boy because he was at least the third minor who had accused Dickerson of abusing them. By then, Dickerson had a history "of overt homosexual encounters with two high school boys whom he masturbated," Stahel's letter said.

> 'I do not think we can in conscience present [Donald] Dickerson … as ready for ordination.'
> —Fr. Thomas Stahel
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As their client pursued a lawsuit against the Jesuits decades later, lawyers obtained records from the order's regional archives showing Dickerson had admitted abuse while he was studying to become a priest and was assigned to the order's high

school in New Orleans.

The Jesuits sent him to psychiatric treatment February to June 1975 without reporting him to law enforcement. That was the Catholic Church's practice at the time. The church has since acknowledged that that practice was misguided and has sought reform, including urging its leaders to be transparent and report offenders to law enforcement.

Dickerson gained a recommendation from Jesuit Fr. Louis Lambert to be ordained as a priest after completing the treatment. Lambert said Dickerson was abusive only when he "got nervous," Stahel said.

Yet, having learned of a third allegation of sexual abuse by Dickerson at the time he wrote his letter, Stahel implored Arrupe to at least hold off on the ordination, which had been scheduled for Dec. 27, 1977.

"Dickerson seems to me a poor risk for ordination," Stahel — who was managing editor at the Jesuits' America magazine from 1972 to 1977 and 1985 to 1988 — told Arrupe. "I do not think we can in conscience present Dickerson … as ready for ordination."

The Jesuits subsequently postponed Dickerson’s ordination and once again sent him to psychiatric treatment in 1978. In September 1978, Arrupe wrote to Lambert, saying he had received the psychiatric report on Dickerson.

"I shall await further information on the case from Father Stahel," Arrupe wrote.

Arrupe does not appear in any other documents so far reviewed by The Guardian and WWL Louisiana.

Pedro Arrupe with reporters

Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe, left, Jesuit superior general from 1965 to 1983, answers reporters' questions about the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in this February 1947 photo. Arrupe was the director of novices at Nagatsuka just outside the city when the bombing took place. (CNS/Jesuits)

In June 1979 and January 1980, Stahel wrote two memos describing conversations with Dickerson. In the first conversation, Dickerson said that “the incident of

December, 1977” was "relatively insignificant" and that the doctor who treated him agreed, according to Stahel.

In the second conversation, Dickerson again said that the same incident was "relatively insignificant," though he understood "such incidents have far reaching consequences, can cause scandal and in short must be regarded as serious."

Arrupe, who had served as superior general of the Society of Jesus since 1965, suffered a debilitating stroke in 1981 and resigned in 1983. He died in 1991 at age 83.

After his ordination, Dickerson was assigned to the order's Jesuit College Preparatory School of Dallas.

Jesuit officials did not alert leaders at the campus about their knowledge that Dickerson was a child molester, according to The Dallas Morning News. The newspaper attributed that fact to a deposition from Jesuit Fr. Phillip Postell, who oversaw schools in the region, during clergy abuse-related litigation in 2021.

By July 1981, Stahel received a letter from Postell informing him that Dickerson had been removed from Dallas' prep school. The parents of a minor had reported an accusation against Dickerson to the school, whose principal discovered earlier accusations against the priest, the Dallas Morning News reported.

The parents' accusation was one of multiple reports of child abuse made against Dickerson while he worked at the Dallas school. Postell — who was president of the school 1992 to 2011 — said in 2021 that he should have reported Dickerson to law enforcement at that point, according to the Morning News. Instead, Jesuit leaders transferred Dickerson about 200 miles east to the Cathedral of St. John Berchmans in Shreveport, Louisiana.



The Cathedral of St. John Berchmans, Shreveport, Louisiana, is one of the places where the Jesuit priest Donald Dickerson ministered before resigning from the order after several allegations that he sexually abused minors. (Wikimedia Commons/Creative Commons Attribution 3.0/Superawesomeperson at English Wikipedia)

While assigned to St. John, Dickerson frequently visited Loyola New Orleans, which he had attended as an undergraduate and graduate student, the plaintiff would later assert in court. The plaintiff said he was granted early admission into Loyola in August 1984 at age 17 and he met Dickerson shortly after beginning his freshman year.

Dickerson soon began inviting the plaintiff to dinner weekly with other priests, the plaintiff said. That allegedly escalated into groping and oral rape, including behind a sacristy. The plaintiff would later say in his lawsuit that Dickerson raped him in a dorm room.

The Jesuits dismissed Dickerson from the order after the Shreveport church received a letter in 1986 from a family accusing him of "feeling and touching" their son inappropriately, the Morning News said. That was at least the seventh documented allegation against Dickerson — not counting the underage Loyola New Orleans student, who sued in 2024.



Former Jesuit Fr. Donald Dickerson was accused of sexually abusing a student at Loyola University New Orleans. Dickerson resigned from the Jesuits in 1986. (Wikimedia Commons/CC-by-2.0)

A Jesuit official handling that seventh known complaint drafted a memo to colleagues in which he insisted that the accused priest deserved "to be given the benefit of the doubt."

"We should proceed on something like this very cautiously," Fr. Edmundo Rodriguez wrote in the memo. "On the possibility of a set up, however remote," the memo said, deliberation about Dickerson should be limited only to "this particular case." Nothing should be discussed publicly, given "the sensitivity of the material," Rodriguez

added.

Rodriguez also suggested the Jesuits provide $10,000 to Dickerson in living expenses over the next year, especially while the matter was pending.

Dickerson resigned from the Jesuit order less than a week later, saying it was for his "own peace and the good of the Society of Jesus." It's unclear if Dickerson was laicized, or removed from the priesthood.

"I am grateful to the society for what it has done to try to help me," including sending him to "extensive psychological therapy" at Foundation House in Jemez Spring, New Mexico, Dickerson wrote in his resignation letter.

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The treatment center was run by the Servants of the Paraclete Foundation from 1947 until it closed in the 1990s.

"It is clear now that these measures have not been enough to prevent my falling into problems which become public and have the potential of harming the Society of Jesus and the church seriously," Dickerson said in his resignation letter. "I appreciate your willingness to suspend judgment on the question of moral culpability and to acknowledge my genuine efforts to overcome my tendencies."

'Appalling'

The Jesuits in December 2018 acknowledged that allegations against Dickerson were credible. That year, it included him on a published list of more than 40 order priests and other members who had been the subject of child molestation claims deemed credible while working in what is now considered the order's U.S. Central and Southern Province.

Jesuit officials released that list within months of a Pennsylvania grand jury report which established Catholic clergy abuse in that state had been more widespread than originally thought, creating pressure on religious orders to release the names of their members against whom credible allegations of sexual abuse had been made.

In June 2024, the former Loyola New Orleans student who said Dickerson abused him in 1984 sued the university, the Jesuits and the Shreveport Diocese for

damages. He did so almost immediately after Louisiana's supreme court upheld a law temporarily allowing people in the state to sue for compensation over sexual abuse no matter how long ago it had occurred.

The lawsuit was ongoing as of July 24.

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At least one Jesuit has made it clear that he was not proud of how the order supervised Dickerson. Fr. John Armstrong, the assistant secretary of the Jesuits' U.S. Central and Southern Province.

Armstrong said he participated in a 1976 meeting about Dickerson. He said he then had to work in Dickerson’s proximity in New Orleans in the mid-1980s and loathed it, even though they didn’t meaningfully interact much as far as he could remember.

Under oath on June 6 at a law office in St. Louis, home to the Jesuits' Central and Southern Province, Armstrong said the Jesuits would not have needed to let Dickerson minister at any of their institutions if they had ousted him or reported the allegations to law enforcement.

It was "appalling that it was handled that way," Armstrong said. It was “appalling that it happened. [I] feel terrible for the people that were victims of [Dickerson], and it is beyond my understanding how after that first incident … he was allowed to go any further."

**This story has been updated to correct the priest's full name.*