News



Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe, seen in an undated photo, served as superior general of the Society of Jesus from 1965 to 1983. He died in 1991 at age 83, and his cause for canonization opened in Rome in 2019. (NCR file photo)



by Ryan Di Corpo

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Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe, who died in 1991, is a revered figure among many Catholics for leading the Society of Jesus during a transformative time in church history and for steering the Jesuit order toward missionary work among the world's peripheries.

The Spanish-born Arrupe's dramatic life includes ministering to survivors of the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima, shepherding the Jesuits through the post-Vatican II period and rebranding the order's mission to train men and women "who will live not for themselves but for God and his Christ."

Now a candidate for sainthood, Arrupe was superior general of the same Jesuit order that trained and formed Pope Franics. But Arrupe's role in a heated dispute in 1977 between two leaders of a U.S. province of the Jesuit order 5,500 miles from the Jesuit headquarters in Rome has led some involved in the lawsuit to argue Arrupe's cause for sainthood should end.

Revealed in hundreds of pages of unsealed records in a New Orleans court, Arrupe was asked to weigh in on the ordination of a Jesuit seminarian who was accused of sexually abusing minors.

Donald B. Dickerson, a serial sex abuser, was ultimately ordained in 1980, less than three years after Arrupe apparently consented to a local decision to postpone his ordination.

The National Catholic Reporter reviewed hundreds of pages of documents filed in the lawsuit and found only two letters connected to Arrupe, one to Arrupe in December 1977 and one from Arrupe in September 1978. After the exchange, Dickerson's ordination was delayed until 1980. It is unclear what role, if any, Arrupe played in the ultimate decision to ordain him.

While Arrupe, as superior general, could have stopped the ordination, biographies and statements from Arrupe show that he opposed an authoritarian style of leadership of the Jesuit order. If local Jesuit officials decided to ordain Dickerson, it is unclear if Arrupe would have stepped in to stop it — and whether he had all the facts that would have supported such a decision.

The 1977 appeal to Arrupe is detailed in the allegations against Dickerson. Other documents reveal numerous other Jesuit officials grappling with how to deal with a

man whom they knew molested children.

Correspondence over 12 years between multiple priests provides a complex, behind-the-scenes look at Jesuit leaders in New Orleans struggling to contain a predator priest's repeated abuse of children while encouraging him to seek professional help.

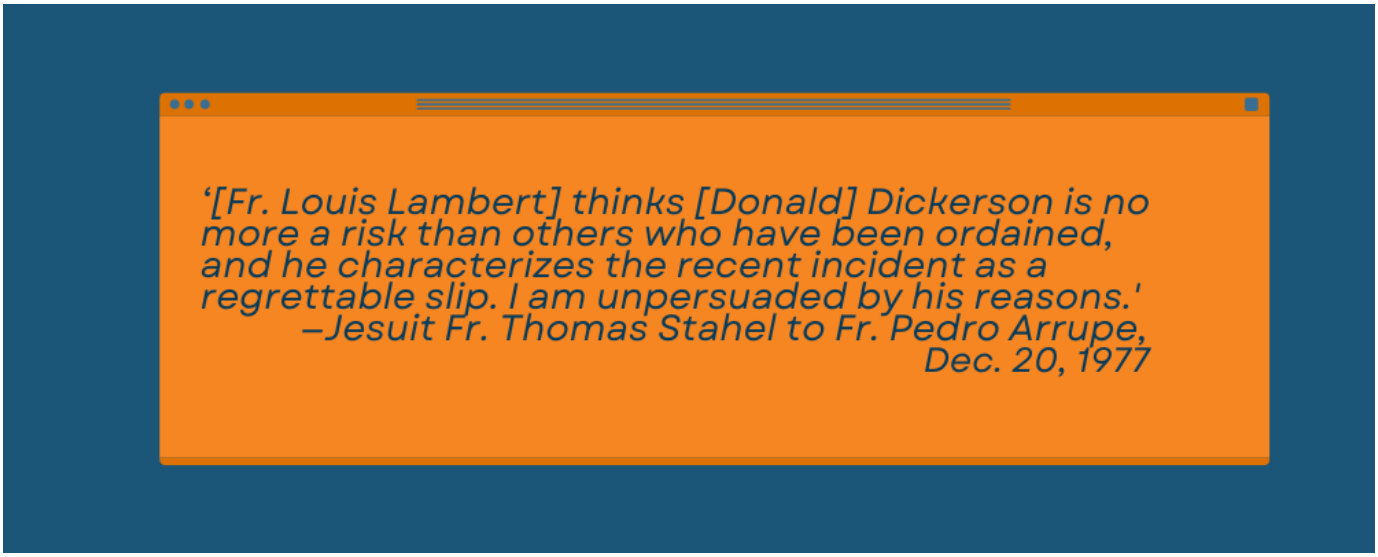
Pope Francis prays at the tomb of Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe.

Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pope, prays at the tomb of Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe, superior general of the Jesuits from 1965 to 1983, in the Church of the Gesu in Rome Sept. 10, 2013. (CNS/Alessia Giuliani, Catholic Press)

The letter to Arrupe, recently reported by The Guardian and NCR, details a protracted dispute between Dickerson's New Orleans provincial, Jesuit Fr. Thomas Stahel, and his vice provincial for formation, Jesuit Fr. Louis Lambert. Stahel opposed ordaining Dickerson in 1977, while Lambert strongly recommended Dickerson for the priesthood despite his record. But by the end of 1979, Stahel had changed his mind and supported Dickerson's ordination.

By any measure, the decision to ordain Dickerson, who was accused of sexually abusing or harassing at least six boys while a Jesuit novice and later as a priest, was both a mistake and tragedy.

Plaintiffs' lawyers in the Louisiana case — filed against the Dioceses of Shreveport and Alexandria, Loyola University New Orleans and the Jesuits’ U.S. Central and Southern Province — said the two letters show that Arrupe covered up child sex abuse. But some historians and scholars of sex abuse in the church say that the Jesuit leader and Dickerson's superiors followed the flawed practices of their era, sending the priest for counseling and deferring to regional authorities about whether to ordain a man with allegations of sexual abuse against him.



The Louisiana court case, filed in June 2024, accuses Dickerson of raping a 17-year-old student at Loyola University New Orleans in 1984. The attorney Richard Trahant says that releasing documents related to Dickerson — and the priests who knew of his crimes against minors — represents the kind of public accountability survivors of abuse deserve. He takes issue with the response from Arrupe, accusing him of "covering up child rape" for decades and calling him "a criminal."

Dawn Eden Goldstein, an author and canon lawyer, said it is unclear if there is sufficient evidence to say the way the Jesuits handled the Dickerson case was a coverup or willful negligence. "At this point we don't know whether this might rather be a case of superiors following the accepted procedures of that time," she said. But she added that explanation does not justify their actions.

'We were overly optimistic'

Thomas Plante, a noted expert on clergy sex abuse and professor of psychology at Santa Clara University, a Jesuit school in California, said that clinicians in the 1970s and early 1980s believed that some sex offenders — clergy and lay — could be cured and returned to society.

"We were overly optimistic about behavioral therapy," Plante said in an interview. "We thought that behavioral therapy could pretty much solve anything."

Before the 1980s, the clinical treatment of sex offenders was largely based on psychoanalysis instead of focusing on building skills or changing an offenders' environment to inhibit abuse, said David Finkelhor, a sociologist and the director of

the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire.

"They didn't know at the time what things people needed to do to not re-offend," he said.

But during the 1980s,"good quality, comprehensive research" emerged that changed how psychologists approached abusers, Plante said.

Treatment today is "radically different," Plante said, and laws have changed to make many professionals mandatory reporters of child abuse.

Modern treatment, Finkelhor said, emphasizes "building guardrails" to stop abuse from occurring.

According to court documents, Dickerson had received psychological treatment at least twice, in 1975 and 1978. Dickerson later noted that he had submitted to "extensive psychological therapy" at Foundation House, a former treatment facility for troubled priests run by the Servants of the Paracletes in Jemez Springs, New Mexico.

Acording to a 1977 letter, Dickerson's Jesuit superiors believed that his "psychosexual problem was under sufficient control." It is unclear if Arrupe agreed with this assessment.

While Arrupe did not block Dickerson from the priesthood, it would have been highly unusual for the superior general to overturn the decision of a Jesuit provincial in another country.

In a 1972 address to Vatican officials and religious leaders in Rome, Arrupe said a superior should become a "slave of the community," and he cautioned against adopting an authoritarian style. "There is no tolerance today for the superior-administrator figure who, for the sake of bringing efficiency to the work, bears down hard upon his subjects as persons," Arrupe said.

'He does whatever he pleases'

Born in 1936 in Jerseyville, Illinois, Dickerson entered the Society of Jesus in Louisiana in August 1971 and professed his first vows two years later, a day before he turned 37, court documents show.

Jesuits undergo a yearslong formation period that begins with a two-year novitiate and concludes after ordination with the final vows, a process that can take 15 to 20 years. While Jesuits are not priests until ordination, they begin using the initials "S.J.," for the Society of Jesus, upon entering the order.

Early in his formation, Dickerson was assigned to the Jesuit High School in New Orleans, where letters say he abused two boys. In early December 1974, he molested a minor in a car en route to a high school awards ceremony, according to court documents.



Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe, center, speaks at a press conference in February 1979 in Puebla, Mexico, during a conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council. (NCR photo/Penny Lernoux)

In 1974, Jesuit Fr. Anthony McGinn described Dickerson as lazy and manipulative.

"He does whatever he pleases," McGinn wrote in a character appraisal that is now an exhibit in the court case. "This is a dangerous sign that the Society will have difficulties with him in future years."

Dickerson should not be advanced to theology, the next level in formation, McGinn concluded. The Jesuit in 1992 would become the president of Jesuit High in New Orleans. McGinn did not respond to a request for comment.

Despite the negative appraisal, Dickerson went to theology instruction in Chicago.

In March 1975, during a six-hour meeting attended by multiple priests and a brother at the Jesuit provincials' office to discuss several clergy, Jesuit Fr. Louis Lambert, the vice provincial for formation and a top Jesuit in the region, held that Dickerson "was making great progress in working through his problems" and that a recent psychological report on him was "positive." At that meeting, four priests voted to send Dickerson to theology despite McGinn's warnings.

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Stahel

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Stahel, pictured in an undated file photo, died of cancer in 2006 at age 68. (CNS/Clarion Herald)

By 1977, Stahel's concerns had reached a crisis point. The provincial of the Jesuits' former New Orleans Province, Stahel had learned of yet another accusation that Dickerson harassed a minor. Five days before Christmas that year, the provincial, who would later serve as executive editor at America magazine, detailed specific misgivings about Dickerson in a lengthy letter to Arrupe.

"I do not think we can in conscience present Dickerson to bishop as ready for ordination," Stahel wrote to Arrupe one week before Dickerson was to be made a priest. "I recommend that Dickerson's ordination be postponed, at the very least, and that we raise with him a question about his staying in the Society." According to the letter, Arrupe had already agreed that Dickerson's ordination should be postponed.

It is unclear if Arrupe responded to this letter. NCR has not obtained other documents detailing a back-and-forth conversation between the superior general and the New Orleans provincial.

Fr. Arturo Sosa

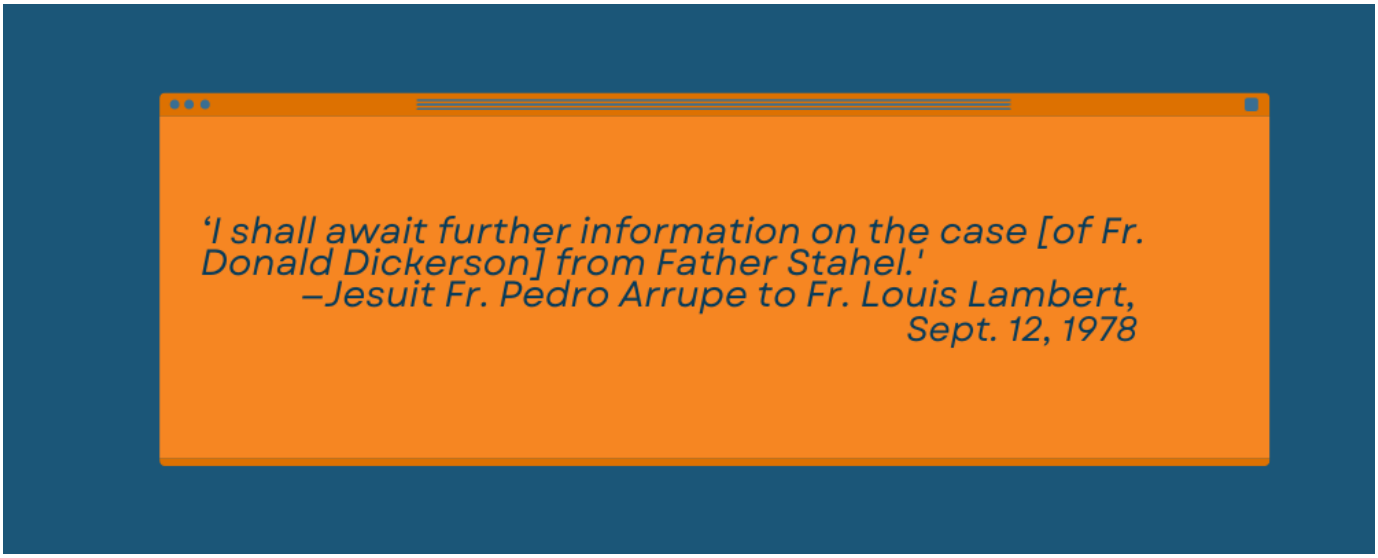
Jesuit Fr. Arturo Sosa, superior general of the Jesuits, speaks at a news conference in Rome April 10. Elected in 2016, Sosa leads the church's largest men's religious order. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Stahel wrote that he first contacted Arrupe to help resolve a debate with Lambert regarding how to handle Dickerson. Stahel, who details serious concerns regarding Dickerson's "suitability" for the priesthood, found himself at an impasse with Lambert. "He thinks Dickerson is no more a risk than others who have been ordained, and he characterizes the recent incident as a regrettable slip. I am unpersuaded by his reasons," Stahel wrote to the superior general.

"I have the distinct impression that Fr. Lambert's resistance in this matter had to do, not with the merits of his case, but with the jealous guard he maintains over his Vice-Provincial's prerogatives," Stahel wrote. "He was determined that I should have nothing to say about Dickerson's ordination, and it was impossible to come to a meeting of the minds concerning evidence that seemed overwhelming to everyone but him."

Describing the disagreement, Stahel alleged that Lambert considered Dickerson's improper behavior to be the result of nerves and rejected Arrupe's move to postpone ordination as unjust "strong-arm tactics."

Lambert, Stahel said, "argued that, once a man is approved for ordination by the Society (as Dickerson had been), the Society is committed to him. By this kind of reasoning, nothing a person could do between approval and ordination could disqualify him."



In September 1978, Arrupe said in a letter to Lambert that he had received a psychological report on Dickerson, but the details of that report were not readily available. "I will await further information on the case from Father Stahel," wrote the

superior general.

Dickerson had still not been ordained by the summer of 1979, when Stahel said he had told him that sexually harassing an underage boy was "a relatively insignificant incident."

The provincial disagreed.

"I did not feel that I could ordain him until we had removed as much as possible any worries that such incidents would happen again," Stahel wrote.

Donald B. Dickerson case

1971: Donald B. Dickerson, born Aug. 16, 1936, in Jerseyville, Illinois, enters the Society of Jesus in August.

1973: Dickerson pronounces first vows in August; begins teaching at Jesuit High in New Orleans

1974: Dickerson molests two high school boys while teaching at Jesuit High; Jesuit Fr. Anthony McGinn raises serious concerns about his behavior.

1975: Four Jesuits vote in March to send Dickerson to theology training in Chicago despite knowledge of his "problems."

1977: Jesuit Fr. Thomas Stahel writes to Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe in December about an ongoing dispute with Jesuit Fr. Louis Lambert.

1978: Arrupe writes to Lambert in September, confirming receipt of a psychological report on Dickerson.

1979: Stahel writes in December that he thinks Dickerson should be ordained.

1980: Dickerson is ordained in June in Alabama; he begins teaching that September at Jesuit prep in Dallas.

1981: After allegations of abuse, Dickerson leaves Dallas for co-cathedral in Shreveport; Arrupe suffers a disabling stroke.

1982: Dickerson allegedly molests a boy in Shreveport.

1983: Arrupe steps down as superior general; he is succeeded by Jesuit Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach.

1984: A woman writes to a Louisiana bishop in September, claiming that Dickerson molested her son; a psychological profile describes Dickerson as "very sick."

1986: Jesuit Fr. Edmundo Rodriguez recommends that Dickerson ask for dismissal from the priesthood; Rodriguez asks Kolvenbach to remove Dickerson in March.

1991: Arrupe dies in Rome.

2009: A case is settled where Dickerson was accused of molesting an eighth-grade boy.

2010: A lawsuit claims Dickerson raped a boy in 1982; the suit is later settled.

2016: Dickerson dies.

2019: Jesuit Dallas is sued by a former student who claims he was raped by Dickerson decades prior.

2024: Dickerson is accused in a New Orleans court of raping a 17-year-old Loyola University student in 1984.

But Stahel's worries about Dickerson had apparently subsided by the end of that year, after Dickerson understood the "scandal" molesting children could cause. "I said that I thought he should be ordained," Stahel wrote in a memorandum dated Dec. 30, 1979. Six months later, on June 7, 1980, Dickerson was ordained by Birmingham, Alabama, Bishop Joseph Vath.

'The situation with Fr. Dickerson'

Dickerson began teaching at the boys Jesuit preparatory school in Dallas that same year. But in 1981, he was removed from Jesuit Dallas following an allegation from a child's parents. He was sent in September 1981 to St. John Berchmans, then a co-cathedral in Shreveport, Louisiana.

A $12 million lawsuit would later accuse Dickerson of raping a boy there in 1982. That year, Stahel had written to Dickerson with the hope "nothing would happen in Shreveport." The case was settled for an undisclosed sum.

Two years later, in August 1984 letter to Dickerson, Jesuit Fr. Edmundo Rodriguez, the new provincial in New Orleans, noted that he had "a duty to protect the Society and the Church from unacceptable behavior of its members."

A 1984 psychological profile of Dickerson written by the Servants of the Paraclete, the men's order that treated troubled priests, described him as "very sick" and in need of intensive, long-term treatment. During Dickerson's evaluation, he said that he had been molested by a man at age 6, according to clinical notes included in the most recent New Orleans lawsuit.

In September 1984, a mother wrote a letter to the bishop of Alexandria-Shreveport that alleged that Dickerson had molested her son.

"Recently he was rejected by his natural father," the woman said of her son. "Instead of help from Fr. Dickerson, he has been mentally damaged even further." She added that Dickerson should never work near children again.

Court documents show that Jesuit Fr. Thomas Barberito had spoken in August 1984 with the bishop about "the situation with Fr. Dickerson." According to Barberito, the bishop said he would refer concerns to the provincial if one of the parties involved contacted his office.

Dickerson's Jesuit superiors assigned him to Loyola University New Orleans in 1985. There, the New Orleans lawsuit alleges, he abused another minor. And yet, Dickerson maintained the support of his direct superior even while facing an investigation.

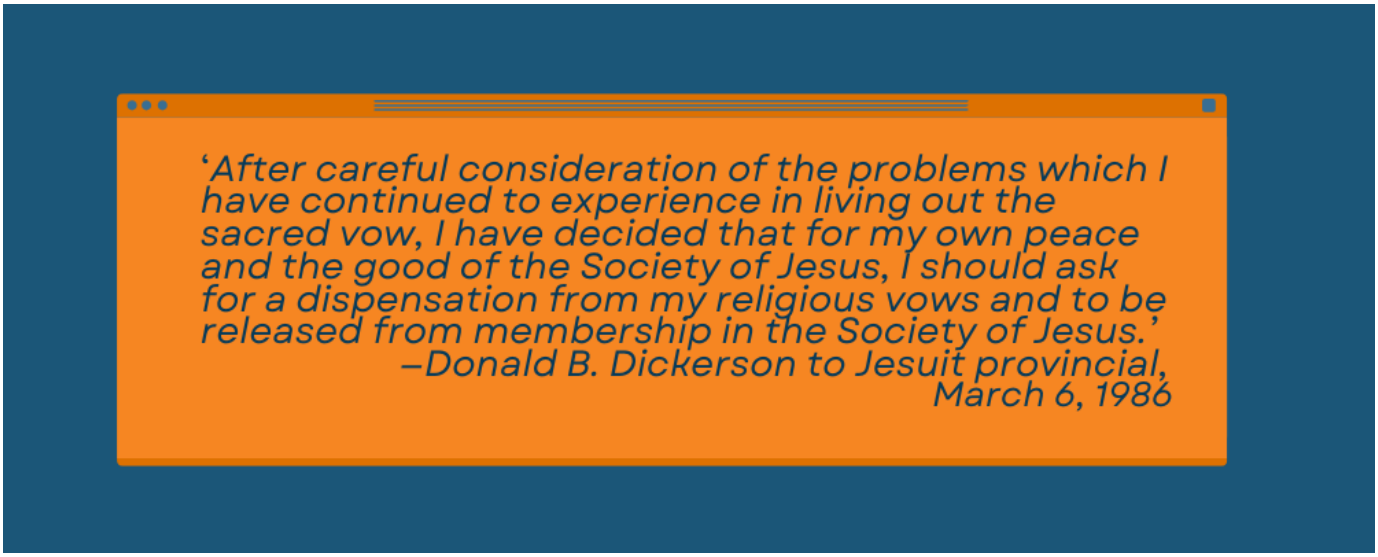


Jesuit Fr. Edmundo Rodriguez in San Bernardino, Calif., in February 1979 (NCR photo/Bill Kenkelen)

"Don has to be given the benefit of the doubt," Rodriguez wrote in a communication dated Feb. 28, 1986. "We owe Don the same careful due process which we would want to provide for anyone else."

But in early March 1986, after Rodriguez received three separate allegations against Dickerson in one week, the provincial encouraged him to leave the priesthood "to save everyone from a very painful process."

Dickerson complied, thanking the provincial for his "willingness to suspend judgement on the question of moral culpability and to acknowledge my genuine efforts to overcome my tendencies." On March 12, 1986, Rodriguez wrote that he had contacted Jesuit Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, then the order's superior general, requesting that Dickerson be dismissed from the Society and priestly life.



Following his laicization, Dickerson has been at the center of multiple lawsuits beyond the recent New Orleans case. It is unclear if Dickerson ever faced criminal charges for accusations of sexual abuse of minors.

In 2009, a case was settled after he was accused of molesting an eighth-grade boy. Dickerson was accused in 2010, in the aforementioned $12 million lawsuit, of raping an 11-year-old boy at St. John Berchmans in 1982. And a former Jesuit Dallas student sued the school in 2019, alleging Dickerson gave him alcohol and raped him during a trip to Alabama decades prior.

During his 18 years as Jesuit superior general, Arrupe emerged as a widely respected leader, beloved by the men's religious community at the time of his resignation in 1983, two years after a disabling stroke. His cause for canonization, which opened in Rome in 2019, remains active. Three plaintiffs' attorneys in the New Orleans case now say he should not be considered a saint. The Jesuit Conference of the United States and Canada did not respond to multiple requests for comment, and it's unclear if other records about Dickerson are in the Jesuits' Rome files. McGinn, the only Jesuit official in this story who is still alive, did not respond to a request for comment. The lawsuit was ongoing as of Aug. 20.

Ramon Antonio Vargas of The Guardian US contributed to this report.

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