News
Obituary



Ray Mouton is pictured in an undated photo in St. Jean Pied de Port, in southern France. Mouton died Feb. 5, 2026, at a hospital in Jefferson, Louisiana. (Courtesy of Todd Mouton)



by Ryan Di Corpo

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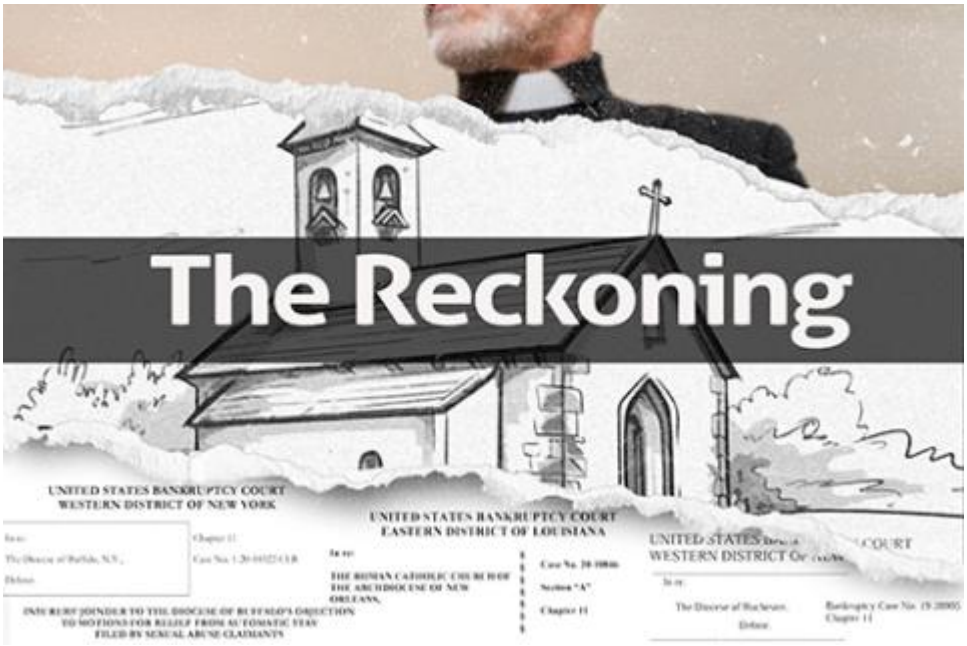
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February 5, 2026
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Ray Mouton, the Louisiana attorney who defended since-defrocked priest Gilbert Gauthe against child sex abuse allegations and later co-authored a confidential report warning U.S. bishops about the growing crisis of clergy abuse nationwide, long before the Vatican publicly acknowledged the scandal, died Feb. 5 at a hospital in Jefferson, Louisiana. He was 78.

His death was confirmed by his son Todd, who cited the cause as cancer.

The Cajun lawyer's introduction to the scourge of child sex crimes committed by Catholic priests came from representing Gauthe, a prolific abuser, nearly two decades before revelations in The Boston Globe roiled the Vatican and stunned the faithful. Galvanized and horrified by what he learned, Mouton, a Catholic, began a crusade to caution bishops about a burgeoning national scandal that tallied untold numbers of young victims and threatened to bankrupt the church.



(NCR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

But attempts by Mouton and others to compel Catholic hierarchs to appropriately address clergy abuse in the mid-1980s fell largely on deaf ears as the church sought

to shield itself from consequences. His efforts also came at great personal cost; Mouton descended into alcoholism, saw his law practice shutter, got a divorce and stopped attending Mass, eventually leaving the U.S. for a new life in France.

"I worked, battling the diocese, the American church and the Vatican until I literally burned myself up — spiritually, mentally and physically," Mouton told a Louisiana paper in 2013.

Mouton was a well-to-do, 37-year-old criminal defense attorney, when he was retained by Louisiana's Lafayette Diocese in August 1984 to represent Gilbert Gauthe, a pastor and former Boy Scouts chaplain who had admitted to molesting 37 children across several area parishes. That October, a grand jury indicted Gauthe on 34 counts of sex crimes involving minors, including 11 counts for producing child pornography and a single aggravated rape charge.

Motivated by "vanity and greed," Mouton later confessed, he took the case and boarded a flight to meet Gauthe, who had been shipped off to a treatment center for troubled priests in central Massachusetts. "I had a high-visibility client and I knew the Catholic Church could pay like a damn slot machine," he told The Washington Post in 2002.



The case of Fr. Gilbert Gauthe, the since-defrocked priest sentenced to 20 years in prison in 1985 for molesting boys, was one of the first nationally publicized cases of priest pedophilia. (CNS file photo)

Encountering the 39-year-old Gauthe as a seriously sick man who spoke like a child and threatened to kill himself if imprisoned, Mouton rejected a guilty plea and believed the priest should be confined to a medical facility. Gauthe initially pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity, but he later accepted a plea bargain and admitted guilt in exchange for prosecutors removing the rape charge. In October 1985, he

was sentenced to 20 years in prison; he was paroled a decade later, and continued to face additional sex crimes charges.

Prior to defending Gauthe, Mouton saw the church as "a repository of goodness," but he became disillusioned when investigations revealed how Catholic leaders, specifically Bishop Gerald Frey, who led the Lafayette Diocese for 17 years, had been warned about Gauthe's crimes and even confronted him without alerting law enforcement. On June 7, 1985, NCR published groundbreaking reporting on the Gauthe case, which first appeared in the Times of Acadiana, by freelance journalist Jason Berry. NCR labeled the church's actions in Lafayette as a cover-up.

"Along with the rest of society, the church must examine the issues of child abuse, drawing most critical attention to those aspects of the problem involving church figures and structures that have victimized the young and their families," reads the NCR editorial.

Mouton clearly agreed. Joining forces with Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, a canon lawyer at the Vatican Embassy in Washington, and the late Fr. Michael Peterson, who started a psychiatric hospital in Maryland for clerics, the three men drafted a secret 92-page report in a Chicago hotel. The document warned that sexual abuse by Catholic priests represented a immense national crisis that could cost the church billions in damages. Known as "the Manual," its authors circulated the report among U.S. bishops and hoped they would discuss it during a June 1985 meeting in Collegeville, Minnesota. But it was largely ignored.

"Ray Mouton saw the scope of an epic crisis at an early stage," said Jason Berry, who wrote about Mouton in his 1992 book *Lead Us Not Into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children*, which chronicled the Gauthe case and others across the country. "The hierarchy's failure to heed that prescient report has cost the church billions of dollars and a continuing loss of believers, as well as great suffering by survivors."

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Self-medicating with alcohol and working all hours of the night, Mouton pushed himself to the limit. He was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and he watched the life he had built — a successful marriage, a respected law practice, a nice home — fall to

pieces. "I'd lost my wife, my career and my religious faith," he told The Washington Post. "I was quite literally lost."

In the fall of 1987 he decided to get sober. Mouton found Europe as a retreat — running with the bulls in Pamplona became a tradition — and he relocated to St. Jean Pied de Port, in southern France, where he lived for decades near the Spanish border. He married his second wife, Melony Barrios, stateside before moving abroad.

Francis Ray Mouton Jr. was born April 1, 1947, in Lafayette, one of five children in an affluent and prominent Southern family. (In the press, he is sometimes named as F. Ray Mouton.) He was a descendant of the Acadian settler Jean Mouton, on whose land, donated in the early 19th century, Lafayette was built. His father was a contractor and his mother taught Sunday school. While an undergraduate student at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (today known as the University of Louisiana at Lafayette), Mouton eloped to Mexico and married his girlfriend Janis Thiberville. He attended law school at Louisiana State University.

Mouton, a bulldog in the courtroom, quickly established himself as a formidable injury attorney and the region's go-to criminal defender, representing a motley bunch of rogues and rascals and the people caught in between, from the drug dealer to the local police chief. Grateful clients paid him in golf balls or straight cash.

In those days Mouton, never far from a cigarette, lived comfortably on an expansive 15-acre estate in Lafayette, complete with horses and a swimming pool. He developed a taste for the finer things in life — champagne, luxury cars, oysters Rockefeller. But by the end of 1985, after Gauthe's sentencing and his battle with Catholic leaders to recognize the abuse crisis, his life had changed dramatically. He spent the majority of his final decades in Europe, visiting the U.S. occasionally for medical care.

He authored *Pamplona: Running the Bulls, Bars and Barrios in Fiesta de San Fermin* (2002) and *In God's House: A Novel About the Greatest Scandal of Our Time* (2012), a roman à clef about a Catholic lawyer fighting to expose abuse in the church. "It's dedicated to the victims, children around the world who are survivors of clergy abuse and those who did not survive," said Mouton at the time of publication.

"Mouton was one of the most brilliant, mercurial personalities I have known," said Berry. "The church owes him a great debt, as do I."

Survivors include his second wife Melony; first wife Janis; three children from his first marriage, Todd, Chad and Jeanne; four siblings and one grandchild.

This story appears in the **The Reckoning** feature series. View the full series.