News
Notre Dame University

The sun sets over the main building and Basilica of the Sacred Heart steeple on the campus of the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind., Nov. 23, 2025. An independent report released May 28, 2026, shows that two priests who oversaw Notre Dame residence halls sexually abused several students during their tenure in the 1980s and 1990s, with both continuing their abuse in parish settings after leaving the school. (OSV News/University of Notre Dame/Matt Cashore)

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An independent report shows that two priests who oversaw University of Notre Dame residence halls sexually abused several students during their tenure in the 1980s and 1990s, with both continuing their abuse in parish settings after leaving the school.

The findings also highlight key issues recently named by the nation's Catholic bishops – such as gaps in communications, records management and oversight – that have continued to hamper safe environment efforts.

The university announced the report in a May 28 press release, stating that an "external investigation" identified "instances of sexual abuse and a predatory pattern of behavior" by Holy Cross Father Thomas King, a member of the order that founded and operates the school.

From 1980 to 1997, King had served as rector of Zahm Hall, an all-male dormitory that is part of the school's single-sex undergraduate residence hall system. After his time at Notre Dame, King also served at parishes in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana and the Diocese of Kalamazoo, Michigan, the report noted.

The report also included allegations related to fellow Holy Cross Father David Porterfield. The priest, who died in November 2025, had been rector of the all-male Sorin Hall dormitory during the early 1980s, and later assistant rector at the former Grace Hall.

After quietly leaving Notre Dame in 1986 to enter an alcohol treatment program, after the university and the order investigated an allegation that he abused a student, Porterfield returned to the area in 1988 and served in various parishes in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend. Following order-led investigations in 2003 and 2011, he was ultimately transferred first to one and then another order-run retirement homes, and restricted from ministry at Notre Dame or with minors. An additional allegation, unrelated to the university, resulted in the order fully restricting his public ministry, said the report.

Both priests were accused of leveraging their clerical positions and their access to students during their time at Notre Dame to perpetrate sexual abuse.

The report found that "while Notre Dame’s commitment to addressing clergy abuse has been clear, the University’s execution has been inconsistent."

In particular, a lack of sufficient coordination between the university and the Congregation of Holy Cross over abuse allegations prevented officials from seeing patterns and escalations in the complaints, the report said.

In response to the report, the university said it has created a survivors' counseling support program, which offers "therapy and mental health services for individuals who experienced sexual abuse or misconduct at Notre Dame" detailed in the report.

In addition, the university said it is "taking immediate action" to redress issues raised in the report by implementing a new oversight policy, improving information

exchanges between Notre Dame and the Holy Cross Fathers, and strengthening education and reporting around abuse.

More than 100 interviews, 1,000 documents

The inquiry – launched last fall by Holy Cross Father Robert A. Dowd, Notre Dame's president, and the university's board chair John Veihmeyer – was sparked by complaints about King initially made in 2018 regarding an incident that took place in the 1990s.

Attorney Helen Cantwell, a former sex crimes prosecutor with no connection to the school or related entities, led the Debevoise & Plimpton firm's investigation.

The inquiry drew on 101 interviews and more than 1,000 documents from the university, its affiliated Holy Cross College, the Holy Cross Fathers, the two dioceses and a Catholic high school. The report said King's legal counsel refused investigators' request to speak with the priest.

During the inquiry, investigators also received complaints about Porterfield as well as other priests, and included their findings on Porterfield to highlight "an extensive course of conduct of abuse at Notre Dame that has not previously been publicly disclosed."

The 'weighing scheme'

Among the incidents detailed in the document were accounts of King demanding male students to disrobe as he feigned to check their weight, hosing them down naked, touching them inappropriately, taking group photos of nude male students and grooming them for his advances. The report said the priest also offered rewards, such as favorable letters of recommendation, and threats as part of his abusive tactics.

One complaint received by the Holy Cross Fathers in 2023 alleged that King had raped a freshman in the shower of the university's athletic building in the 1990s. The former student ultimately declined to further "engage with the order's outside counsel," and the complaint was not further pursued, said the report.

Investigators identified "credible reports" for 15 former students – six of them from Holy Cross College – who had been "subjected to the weighing scheme" by King. The report found that students at both the university and Holy Cross College were preyed upon, with "discussion" of the scheme "widespread among certain Zahm classes."

Other incidents took place within the context of Zahm Hall's "well-known reputation for being especially rowdy and raucous," with "witnesses uniformly described Zahm’s culture as fraternity-like," said the report.

Investigation witnesses described the residence hall as "permeated by a persistent sexual undercurrent, where sexualized behavior was normalized and appropriate boundaries were routinely disregarded," the report said.

Such an environment "promoted conditions in which certain behaviors were obscured under the guise of initiation rituals or excused as typical male behavior," said the report. "We find that the culture of Zahm that witnesses reported was fostered and accepted by Fr. King."

The report also detailed an allegation of abuse by King at St. Mark Parish in Niles, Michigan, where – after leaving Holy Cross College – he was assigned in 2007, becoming pastor in 2008.

In that incident, the report stated, a former parishioner said King directed him to remove his shirt during a post-confession meeting, and then sprayed him with holy water before grabbing the parishioner's groin area. The priest then asked the parishioner, "who was in shock," according to the report, to "bring pornographic films for them to watch together."

The report said the parishioner, who left the parish and never returned, did not report the matter to the Diocese of Kalamazoo or to the Holy Cross Fathers.

However, the report found that two of the Notre Dame complainants did contact the diocese – one in 2020, and a second in 2025. In both cases, the diocese reported the allegations to authorities.

King was eventually removed by the order from the parish in 2020 and placed into its Holy Cross House retirement home, following several years of concerns over his "deteriorating health and erratic behavior," which included "lashing out at parishioners," said the report.

'Continued access to the Notre Dame community'

The report found that amid several abuse complaints, Porterfield had "continued access to the Notre Dame community" due to a "lack of communication and internal recordkeeping at Notre Dame."

Following his 1983 resignation from Notre Dame due to a sex abuse complaint while at Sorin Hall, he was rehired less than a year later as assistant rector of Grace Hall, while serving in 1985 as the university's assistant admissions director. In 1986, the school received another abuse complaint about the priest.

After the university and the order assessed the complaint, the priest quietly left the school that year and entered an alcohol treatment program. In 1988, he returned and "served in various parishes in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend," the report said.

In 2009, "despite Notre Dame being aware of three separate allegations of sexual misconduct" by the priest, the report said, "an alumnus who was suffering from substance abuse issues was unwittingly referred by the Notre Dame Alumni Association to Fr. Porterfield for counseling."

The same alumnus told the university in 2010 that the priest had asked about his sexuality during a meeting at his Fatima House apartment, with Porterfield denying "anything inappropriate happened," the report said.

While placed by his order on "safety plan" in 2011, Porterfield "continued to have access to young men, at least through Alcoholics Anonymous ("AA") retreats," said the report.

In 2018, the mother of an AA attendee complained to the order that the priest had "sent inappropriate text messages to her son" during one such retreat, an event that was not affiliated with Notre Dame. Porterfield's public and AA ministries were restricted subsequent to the order's investigation.

Among the report's concluding recommendations were a call for Notre Dame to "independently address reports against clergy" whether they were current or former employees; develop a "cooperative framework for communicating about complaints either entity receives"; and improve communication, recordkeeping, training and

education regarding sexual abuse.

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