

Rev. Clements accusation is in realm of unthinkable

The famous priest says the charge is “totally unfounded.”

By Laura Washington | Aug 11, 2019, 3:58pm CDT



Ashlee Rezin/Sun-Times

Is nothing sacred in my Church?

That was my question as I read the headline: “**Retired Celebrity Priest George Clements Accused of Sex Abuse in 1970s.**”

It invades the realm of the unthinkable.

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The Rev. George Clements, 87, has been accused of sexually abusing a minor in 1974 while serving as pastor of Holy Angels Church on Chicago's South Side.

Cardinal Blase Cupich has asked Clements "to step aside from ministry pending the outcome of an investigation," according to a statement from the Archdiocese of Chicago.

The charge is "totally unfounded," Clements told the Chicago Sun-Times.

The "atmosphere here today is so toxic," he added, referring to the never-ending sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. "The overwhelming majority of priests have to wake up each morning wondering, 'Is this the morning that someone is going to accuse me of something negative?'"

Last year, an investigation by the Illinois attorney general's office found that 690 Catholic clergy had been accused of sexual assault and abuse by minors.

Now an accusation comes to Clements, once the most famous priest in America.

In black Chicago, Clements is family. African American Catholics who came of age from the 1960s to the 1990s know "Father Clements" as a pioneering icon.

He rose from a working class South Side family to become, in 1945, the first African American to graduate from Quigley Academy Seminary.

Clements served at several South Side churches and led Holy Angels in Bronzeville from 1969 to 1991.

My dad went to school with Clements at St. Elizabeth's School. Clements baptized my brother at St. Ambrose Church.

Back in that day a black priest was a rarity. Black Catholics dwelled in the shadows of the Church, underappreciated and unrecognized.

We loved our churches but had few spare coins for Sunday baskets. Most black families who eagerly enrolled their boys and girls in Catholic schools were not Catholic, but they craved the high standards and values the schools offered.

"Father Clements" championed that cause. He made black Catholics feel like *real* Catholics.

Before the term “activist priest” was coined, Clements marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. for civil rights in the South. He marched against drugs and crime on the streets of Chicago.

Clements created the One Church One Child program, a national effort that pushed churches to help black families adopt the multitudes of black children who languished in the child welfare system. At its peak, the program “was active in 37 states and credited with finding homes for 350,000 children,” the Sun-Times reported.

In 1981, Clements became a different kind of father. He adopted his own child, the first priest to do so.

He took heat from the Archdiocese but went on to adopt three more sons, serving as a model of black fatherhood.

Clements was a longtime fixture on TV news and talk shows. A 1987 made-for-TV movie about his life, “The Father Clements Story,” starred Louis Gossett Jr.

In 1991, he left Chicago to minister at a monastery in Kentucky. He pastored “a tiny church in the poor Diocese of Nassau, the Bahamas,” according to a 2017 Sun-Times profile.

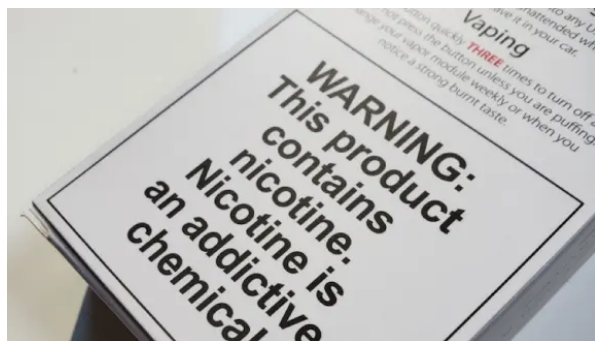
Now retired, he lives in south suburban Evergreen Park.

“Saving the lives of children all over the United States, one child at a time,” exclaims the headline on Clements’ LinkedIn page.

Now, this man stands accused of sexually abusing a minor.

I can only pray.

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