

# THE TRUTH WELL TOLD *Independent*



Monday

October 6, 2025

Number 217 | Volume 138



7 24695 11111 6

TODAY



Sunny and nice;  
breezy in the p.m.

HIGH: **78°**

LOW: **31°**

Winds: SW 7-14 mph

GALLUP, NEW MEXICO 87301

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## Former Gallup priest arrested for alleged sex abuse

*'Prodigal priest' served in Tuba City and Page parishes*

By Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola  
Special to The Independent

GALLUP — GALLUP — A former Catholic priest who served in Diocese of Gallup parishes in the western region of the Navajo Nation has been arrested in Indiana and jailed on sex abuse charges.

Mark Francis Ford, 64, was arrested by the U.S. Marshals Service in Portage, Indiana, Sept. 25, on a warrant obtained by the New Orleans Police

Department. Ford, a resident of Portage, a city about 40 miles southeast of Chicago, is currently an inmate in the Porter County Jail, awaiting extradition to Louisiana, according to Brian Fair, Deputy U.S. Marshal, Eastern District of Louisiana, in a phone interview Thursday.

Ford is a former Vincentian religious order priest who left the priesthood. Fair confirmed Ford faces felony charges of four counts of first-degree rape, two counts of second-degree kidnapping,

two counts of sexual battery, and two counts of indecent behavior with a juvenile.

Fair was asked when Ford will be extradited to Louisiana.

"If he waives extradition proceedings in Indiana, then normally a couple of weeks after that," Fair said. "If he does decide to fight extradition, it could take up to a month and then we'd need a governor's warrant."

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Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola/For the Independent

Mark Ford, a former Catholic priest, was arrested in Indiana by U.S. Marshals on Sept. 25, on a warrant from New Orleans, Louisiana, involving sex abuse charges. Ford worked at two parishes in the Diocese of Gallup in the 1990s, including St. Jude Catholic Church in Tuba City, Arizona, on the Navajo Nation.



## Abusive priest

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### Alleged victim is autistic

Ford's alleged victim is a 31-year-old man reportedly on the autism spectrum, with a degenerative spinal condition, and who is under the legal guardianship of his mother. The alleged victim reportedly met Ford in 2004, when he was a 10-year-old boy, and Ford, assigned to St. Joseph Church in New Orleans, was running a program for children with disabilities. St. Joseph's is a historic New Orleans church run by Ford's religious order, the Congregation of the Mission, known also as the Vincentians or the Order of St. Vincent de Paul.

According to Ford's biographical information posted online, he "co-founded a ministry for children with disabilities and their families" while a priest in New Orleans.

In a telephone interview Thursday, Kristin S. Schubert, the New Orleans attorney representing Ford's alleged victim, said her client went to the New Orleans Police Department with his allegations in 2024. He then participated in "multiple forensic interviews" before police obtained the arrest warrant last month, she said.

Schubert, who confirmed she is planning to file a civil lawsuit on behalf of her client, said she is not aware of any other alleged victims of Ford, but she added others may have come forward to the police since Ford's arrest.

"I would certainly urge any other people who have been abused by Ford to come forward," Schubert said. "They could be an invaluable part in insuring he's held accountable."

### Contradictory information

In media interviews and online biographical profiles, Ford has provided contradictory information about his background. In 1997, while Ford was assigned to the Diocese of Gallup, he was featured in an article entitled "Prodigal priest/Troubles bring Father Mark closer to God and back to reservation he serves," by the *Dallas Morning News*.

Described in the article as a "young, handsome,

popular priest," Ford said he went to high school in Pampa, Texas and was part Navajo, as well as Chiricahua Apache, Zuni, Hispanic and French. Ford acknowledged he grew up not knowing he was Native American and said he didn't know his clans. In the interview, Ford also made some startling statements about himself and the parishes where he was assigned.

Ford admitted he spent seven months in a Servants of the Paraclete treatment center in Albuquerque. Unlike the other priests the newspaper described as being treated for "alcoholism, drug addiction, sexual problems, depression and other illnesses," Ford said he was sent for treatment because he was a "compulsive spender, debtor and money mismanager" who depleted the Tuba City and Page parishes' financial accounts.

Ford also claimed that during the year and a half before his arrival in the Diocese of Gallup, 21 priests rotated through the Catholic parish in Page. "They stayed a few days or weeks and then left," the newspaper stated. "Some suffered from alcoholism and other problems. Some shut themselves up in the rectory and isolated themselves from the community. None did much more than say Mass."

"When a priest leaves here, he never comes back," Ford reportedly told the newspaper.

However, contrary to Ford's statements, the Official Catholic Directory lists the Rev. Walter Opalewski as serving at the Page parish for several years prior to Ford's arrival. Opalewski, a longtime diocesan priest, ministered in Gallup's St. John Vianney Parish before his death in 2008.

According to the Official Catholic Directory, Ford was ordained a Vincentian priest in 1992. He was assigned to Holy Trinity Church in Dallas before moving to the Diocese of Gallup, where he was assigned to St. Jude Catholic Church in Tuba City, Arizona, from 1995 to 1998, and to the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Page, Arizona, from 1995-1998 and 2000-2001.

Ford's name appears to be missing from the assignment pages of the Official Catholic Directory in 1999 and 2002-2003. His name reappears under the Archdiocese of New Orleans, where he is listed as working at the parishes of St. John the Baptist, St. Stephen, and St. Joseph from 2004 to 2006.

Ford's online social media posts and profiles state he



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Mark Ford, a former Catholic priest, was arrested in Indiana by U.S. Marshals on Sept. 25, on a warrant from New Orleans, Louisiana, involving sex abuse charges. Ford worked at two parishes in the Diocese of Gallup in the 1990s, including the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church in the reservation bordertown of Page, Arizona.

received a degree at St. Thomas Theological Seminary before becoming a Catholic priest for 16 years. The profiles state Ford was reportedly appointed by Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco to be Assistant Director of Disability Affairs in 2006, and he was later appointed by Gov. Bobby Jindal as the Executive Director of the Governor's Office of Indian Affairs in 2008.

Ford reportedly then moved to the nonprofit sector, working for Partnership with Native Americans for over 10 years, with positions listed in Phoenix and Rapid City. More recently Ford is listed as joining Feeding America in 2021, with positions in Phoenix and Chicago, and serving as a board member of the American Indian Center in Chicago.

A 2021 Feeding America news release stated Ford is "Chiricahua Apache and Tewa/Tiwa (Pueblo)." Ford's online profile — now deleted — as a board member for the American Indian Center stated Ford was originally from Alamosa, Colorado, and is Chiricahua Apache with Jicarilla Apache and Pueblo descent.

### Unanswered questions

Questions regarding Ford, such as the circumstances surrounding his treatment at the Servants of the Paraclete facility, the year and facts regarding his departure from the Roman Catholic priesthood, and questions about Ford being an enrolled member of a Native American tribe were emailed to the Vincentian religious order, the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the Diocese of Gallup, and the Diocese of Dallas.

Officials with the Archdiocese of New Orleans and the Diocese of Dallas didn't respond to the emails.

Officials with the Diocese of Gallup and the Vincentians didn't answer the questions posed about Ford, but they did offer brief responses.

"Thank you for alerting us to this disturbing news," Deacon Randolph Copeland, the chancellor of the Diocese of Gallup, said in an email Friday. "We are researching our files and consulting as is needed in such matters. It is our intention to publish a public statement soon."

Christopher Duggan, the communications manager for the Congregation of the Mission — Western Province in St. Louis, provided some information about Ford's ministry assignments, some of which contradicted the Official Catholic Directory. Duggan said he could "offer no additional insights" regarding the other questions about Ford, even the date when Ford left the religious order.

"Beyond that, we can only say that the crimes of which Mr. Ford has been accused have no place in society, especially in the church, and run counter to everything we stand for," Duggan added. "We pray for the alleged victim and for victims of sexual abuse everywhere."

#### Editor's Note:

Freelance journalist Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola is currently working on a Data-Driven Reporting Project documenting the historical ministry assignments of clergy sex abusers in the Southwest. She can be contacted at [ehardinburrola@gmail.com](mailto:ehardinburrola@gmail.com).