

Archdiocese of New Orleans pays 'substantial' sum to resolve rape claims against deacon

BY JIM MUSTIAN | JMUSTIAN@THEADVOCATE.COM JUN 20, 2018 - 6:30 PM

Jim Mustian

The Archdiocese of New Orleans has paid more than a half-million dollars to settle claims that a longtime deacon and teacher repeatedly raped an altar boy at Holy Rosary School in New Orleans more than three decades ago.

The settlement, paid this month, brought a swift conclusion to a lawsuit filed earlier this year that accused the archdiocese of allowing a "sexual predator" to work among children in Our Lady of the Rosary Parish and doing "nothing to intervene and prevent such misconduct from occurring."

The lawsuit, filed in Orleans Parish Civil District Court, claimed the abuse began in 1979, when the boy was 8 years old and in the third grade, and continued until he was in the sixth grade.

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It alleged that the victim suffered a host of complications, including dissociative amnesia. He repressed the abuse until his mother ran into the deacon at a grocery store last year, the lawsuit says.

The deacon, George F. Brignac, faced similar allegations throughout his years of ministry, and, according to court documents, was charged at least twice with sexual misconduct — in 1977 in Jefferson Parish and in 1988 in Orleans Parish — without being convicted.

"He should have never been in that position to begin with," said Roger Stetter, the attorney for the plaintiff, who is now 46 and lives in St. Tammany Parish. "My hope is that it couldn't happen today because there is much greater scrutiny of people who want to become deacons and want to work with parochial school students."

The New Orleans Advocate does not identify victims of sexual abuse.

Brignac, who now lives in Metairie, said in a heated telephone interview that he taught for 37 years and could not be expected to recall his actions three decades ago.

"I'm supposed to remember what I did?" said Brignac, 83. "I don't know what happened, but whatever it is, it wasn't a rape, I can assure you."

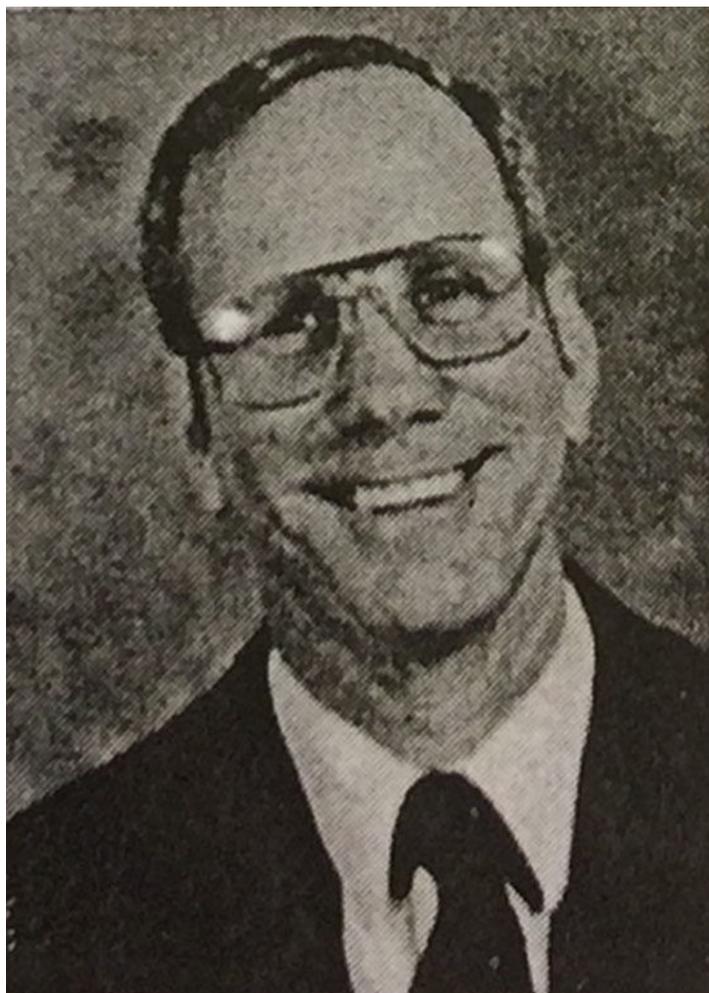
He referred further questions to the archdiocese before hanging up. "I'm not going to talk to you about this case," he said.

Archbishop Gregory Aymond did not return a call seeking comment.

An archdiocese spokeswoman, Sarah McDonald, declined to comment on the case or the archdiocese's response to the sexual misconduct allegations against Brignac. She said in an email that "any and all allegations of abuse are taken seriously and investigated fully."

Church policy requires all records of abuse investigations to be kept confidential, but the Archdiocese of New Orleans pledges, in those same guidelines, "to deal as openly as possible with the members of the church and the broader community about any incident of sexual abuse, other physical abuse, or neglect of minors."

It was not clear Wednesday whether the archdiocese had notified parishioners — or other students Brignac worked with — of the allegations against the deacon.



George Brignac, pictured in a Holy Rosary yearbook photo from the early 1980s.

Yearbook photo

McDonald did not disclose the Catholic schools and parishes where Brignac worked or any time frame for his employment. But newspaper accounts show that he was transferred in 1984 to Cabrini High School, an all-girls school next door to Our Lady of the Rosary Church on Esplanade Avenue.

"It just shows how naïve the archdiocese was during those years about pedophiles," Stetter said.

Stetter did not disclose the exact terms of the settlement but described the amount as "substantial" and on the "upper end of six figures." He said the archdiocese had been apologetic from the outset and "eager" to settle the lawsuit.

"I think it was a fair settlement, and it was very, very prompt," said Stetter, who has represented dozens of local victims of Catholic clergy. "I think the archdiocese is doing a lot to try to curtail this type of abuse. Unfortunately, it's very difficult to weed out possible pedophiles."

Stetter said his client has been invited to speak with Aymond about his experiences. "He's a good man and wants to do right by the victims," Stetter said of the archbishop, "even though it may cost the church a lot of money."

The case follows years of scandal within the Catholic Church, which has been roiled by sexual misconduct allegations against its clergy around the world.

On Wednesday, the church announced that Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the retired archbishop of Washington, D.C., had been suspended from public ministry after an inquiry turned up "credible" allegations that he abused a teenager in New York more than 45 years ago, when he was serving as a priest.

McCarrick, whose suspension was ordered by Pope Francis, is among the highest-ranking church officials in the United States to be accused of sexual abuse.

Woman claims former Jesuit priest, Zen instructor, repeatedly raped her as a child at Loyola University

New Orleans has not been spared from the controversy. In 2003, Bernard Knoth, a former Jesuit priest, resigned as president of Loyola University amid claims he sexually abused one or more minors in 1986, when he was president of a prep school in Indianapolis.

In 2016, a woman filed suit against the archdiocese and Loyola claiming that Ben Wren, while serving as a Jesuit priest, sexually assaulted her dozens of times beginning in 1978 when she was 5 years old. Wren, who had been known affectionately as "Zen Ben Wren," had left the priesthood and died of lung cancer in 2006. That lawsuit remains pending in Orleans Parish Civil District Court.

The most recent lawsuit claims Brignac befriended the altar boy at Holy Rosary beginning in 1979. It says Brignac was "very kind to plaintiff and his parents, and they trusted him to spend time alone with plaintiff and to take him home or to his nana's house while they were at work."

At first, the lawsuit claims, Brignac gave the boy small gifts like ice cream and baseball cards. The deacon told the boy he was special and that he loved him, the lawsuit says, and he admonished him not "to tell his parents because 'they would not understand our relationship.' "

As time passed, Brignac began "dry humping" and sexually abusing the boy, the suit says.

"Brignac followed these depraved acts by sodomizing plaintiff, then a pre-adolescent boy, many times," the lawsuit states. "The rapes occurred in the bedroom of Brignac's home and, on one occasion, in the backseat of his car."

The lawsuit says the boy was too ashamed to tell his parents about the abuse, and that he "did not fully understand what was happening."

It's not clear whether the latest allegations against Brignac have been referred for criminal prosecution. There is no statute of limitations in Louisiana for the rape of a child.

Court records show Brignac was charged in 1977 in Jefferson Parish with three counts of indecent behavior with a juvenile. He was accused of touching two boys on the penis and a third boy on his abdomen. The court records show a judge acquitted him of the charges at a trial.

In 1988, prosecutors in Orleans Parish charged Brignac with one count of molestation of a juvenile. Online court records do not show any proceedings in that case beyond Brignac's initial arraignment and a continuance a week later.

Stetter said the archdiocese, before agreeing to the settlement, interviewed the victim at length. "The church doesn't just give money to people who claim they were abused," he said. "This was a strong case."

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