

CRIME

In open letter, priests support Archbishop Aymond after new sex scandals rock church

The scandals referenced in the letter are separate issues but have both led to new calls for Aymond to step down.



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NEW ORLEANS — A group of New Orleans church leaders has penned an open letter on behalf of the archdiocese's 335 active priests in support of Archbishop Gregory Aymond as he steers the organization through two new, sexually explicit scandals involving priests.

The letter, dated Friday was signed by the chairmen of the Council of Deans and the Presbetyreal Council.

"We emphatically support Archbishop Aymond and his leadership of our local church," the letter reads.

The scandals referenced in the letter are separate issues but have both led to new calls for Aymond to step down.

In one case, a priest in St. Tammany Parish was arrested after being caught having sex with two dominatrixes on the altar of his Pearl River church. Aymond called the acts "demonic" and had the old altar burned before consecrating a new one.

But days before that incident came to light, the church was rocked by another child abuse claim, this time from the priest involved himself.

Rev. Pat Wattigny reportedly disclosed to Aymond that he had sexually abused a minor in 2013.

Aymond removed Wattigny from public ministry and added him to the archdiocese's list of clergy whom the church believes have credible accusations of molestation against them.

"When he informed us of the sexual abuse of a minor which occurred in Dec. 2013, I immediately removed him from ministry...reported it to civil authorities...and made a public announcement," Aymond said. "There was no prior accusation and we knew nothing about the abuse before Oct. 1."

About four months before Wattigny disclosed to the Archdiocese of New Orleans that he sexually abused a minor in 2013, he resigned from his post as chaplain at Pope John Paul II High School because he sent a series of text messages to a student this year that violated diocesan policies, according to church officials.

The recent scandals have added to the black marks on the church in recent years, with more than 60 clergy members now on a list of those with credible allegations of sexual abuse against them.

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Some of the names have been added since its original 2018 release after reporting from WWL-TV's investigative team in a series called Losing Faith.

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The Church has been able to use its May 1 bankruptcy filing to stop the progress of at least 34 abuse lawsuits. Another half dozen filed since then are also on hold pending the bankruptcy.

Lawyers for the victims claim the Archdiocese filed for bankruptcy not out of financial need, but to stop the lawsuits against them.

But the priests of the Archdiocese still said they backed Aymond's handling of the church's scandals.

"While the archbishop did not create the problem of sexual abuse, he has always courageously addressed the issue," they wrote. "Although a small number of priests have betrayed us and you, we commit ourselves and our lives wholeheartedly to the mission of Jesus Christ made present in the church."


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