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What a case against Nashville Diocese, local church reveals about patterns of abuse



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Key Points

A survivor of sexual abuse is suing the Nashville Diocese and St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church in Murfreesboro over response to allegations against former St. Rose educator Michael Lewis.

In February 2022, a judge sentenced Lewis to 20 years in prison in a separate criminal case over the same allegations behind the ongoing civil suit against the diocese and St. Rose.

The civil case could go to trial in yet another key development following other major revelations about different instances of abuse within the Nashville Diocese.

The Catholic Diocese of Nashville and a Murfreesboro parish are closer to a court trial in a civil case that has sought to expose a larger pattern of church leaders undermining accountability for sexual predators.

The plaintiff in the case, an abuse survivor identified as Jane Doe in court documents, argues the diocese and St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church are liable for failing to intervene and potentially preventing abuse by former St. Rose employee Michael Lewis. In a different criminal case over the same abuse against Jane Doe, Lewis pleaded guilty to four counts of statutory rape and a Rutherford County judge sentenced him to 20 years in prison in February 2022.

Since then, Jane Doe's lawsuit in Davidson County Circuit Court has unearthed new revelations about how the diocese handled Jane Doe's case and other cases involving different victims. Though a trial is much likelier due to a new court ruling, Jane Doe's lawsuit has already pointed out repeated failures within the church's system of oversight for combatting abuse.

The diocese and St. Rose have continued to deny any wrongdoing, and referred The Tennessean to responses in court documents.

“The abhorrent abuse described by Plaintiff committed against her by Lewis was the result of the wrongful and criminal act of Lewis, not the Diocese or St. Rose,” the diocese and St. Rose said in a May 23 court filing.

That May 23 filing asked Judge Thomas Brothers to dismiss the case on the grounds of relevant statute of limitations for the timing of when a victim files a lawsuit. Jane Doe’s attorney, Patrick Thronson, said the applicable case law should be a decision for a jury. Brothers ultimately rejected a motion for summary judgment in an Oct. 25 hearing, according to an official recording of the hearing.

As the two sides have sparred over that technical question, Jane Doe’s claim alleging negligence by church authorities has strengthened.

Jane Doe in her lawsuit, in addition to uncovering new details about her own case, has cited evidence of other instances of abuse within the Nashville Diocese and reported inaction by diocesan officials.

Among several other cases she references, the most relevant is that of Mandy Moe, a pseudonym in court documents for a second woman who Lewis allegedly abused. Mandy Moe’s abuse occurred before Jane Doe’s did, when Lewis worked at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, a parish in Tennessee Ridge just northwest of Nashville in Houston County.

Revelations about Mandy Moe’s case, uncovered through discovery in Jane Doe’s lawsuit, show new examples of church leadership knowing Lewis was dangerous and still let him work in Catholic schools.

Lewis’ behavior at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton caused a priest to report “credible allegations that Lewis ... committed sexual misconduct with a young adult female, and recommended he not be allowed around young girls,” Thronson said in an Oct. 18 court filing. “The Diocese has never sought to contact Jane Doe regarding her own abuse by Lewis or the prior allegations of misconduct against Lewis.”

Related: Judge sentences former Catholic Sunday school teacher for abuse at Murfreesboro parish

History repeated

In Mandy Moe's case, diocesan officials first learned of Lewis' alleged abuse in an Oct. 8, 2008, letter from St. Elizabeth Ann Seton pastor Father Richard Cash.

The letter detailed how Lewis, who began abusing Mandy Moe when she was 19, impregnated Mandy Moe and pressured her to get an abortion, according to a copy of the letter in court filings. Additional filings in Jane Doe's lawsuit corroborate these details, including a deposition with Mandy Moe's sister-in-law who accompanied Mandy Moe to get the abortion.

Diocesan officials in the office of former Nashville Bishop David Choby were initially responsive but ceased their pursuits a couple months later when Cash reportedly told them Mandy Moe "had withdrawn her accusation and that was fine," according to a memo of that conversation.

Lewis continued to work at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton for three more years until he started working at St. Rose, where he met Jane Doe and started abusing her in 2014, according to court filings. A church official acknowledged in a Feb. 9 deposition there was no transfer of records between the diocese or St. Elizabeth Ann Seton to St. Rose about the previous allegations against Lewis in Mandy Moe's case.

Jane Doe's case mirrors that of Mandy Moe. Community members and church leaders became aware of Lewis' behavior toward Jane Doe years before Lewis faced pressure to vacate his role.

Lewis received his first formal written reprimand at St. Rose in early 2016, soon after about 10 of those community members wrote letters to Choby and his staff in a groundswell demand for Lewis' ouster. Lewis resigned from St. Rose in April 2016 and received \$6,979 in severance, according to copies of his resignation letter and severance agreement included in court filings.

Jane Doe would come to a clearer understanding of the nature of the abuse she suffered at the hands of Lewis years later, eventually leading to her report to the police and then her lawsuit against the diocese and St. Rose.

Jane Doe's journey of coming to terms with Lewis' abuse and then starting to question if church leadership could have intervened earlier was incremental. And it wasn't entirely of her own accord. The survivor outlined her thought process in a 2020 journal reflection, a

copy of which is included in a series of recent court filings containing other records and deposition transcripts.

“I saw her pain and how it mirrored my own, and I prayed that this would be the last time,” Jane Doe said in that journal reflection. “Again, I was wrong.”

Deepening doubts

Jane Doe developed a sharper skepticism toward the Nashville Diocese after learning about other alleged victims’ abuse cases, resulting in an erosion of Jane Doe’s confidence in those leaders’ ability to respond to abuse in a trauma informed way.

It was more of a feeling at the time, but her lawsuit would eventually prove the extent to which her doubts were based on reality.

“How many other women have come to the Diocese seeking justice but instead found themselves being dismissed? How many other priests have been accused of the same thing but were never investigated?” Jane Doe said in her 2020 journal reflection.

Those questions arose when Jane Doe became aware of two other abuse cases. One of those cases was that of a close friend to Jane Doe, who disclosed to Jane Doe allegations of abuse against a Murfreesboro priest. The second case was about former Nashville priest Kevin McGoldrick, who was the former chaplain at Nashville’s Aquinas College.

A former student at St. Cecilia Academy, a sister institution to Aquinas College located on the same campus, accused McGoldrick of abuse in 2020. That disclosure led to an apology by St. Cecilia’s leadership, a settlement between the alleged victim and the Nashville Diocese, and more recently a lawsuit against the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, where McGoldrick worked before coming to Nashville.

The McGoldrick case struck Jane Doe because she attended St. Cecilia for high school and even interacted with McGoldrick on occasion, according to a Dec. 4, 2023 deposition. Jane Doe would eventually get to know the alleged victim in the McGoldrick case.

“Based on what I saw, I couldn’t trust that they (Nashville Diocese) would do everything in their power to enact justice,” Jane Doe said in her 2020 journal reflection, referencing the cases of McGoldrick and her friend who disclosed allegations against a Murfreesboro priest. “It seemed as though they would do their best to keep it quiet and move on.”

The diocese has protested these sorts of portrayals and has sought to elevate examples of its processes proving effective for responding to abuse. A recent example is the diocese's response to an abuse report against a former associate pastor at St. Philip Catholic Church in Franklin. That former priest, Juan Carlos Garcia, is facing a 10-count indictment in a Williamson County criminal court.

But court filings in this case and others show Jane Doe and different victims will need more proof to dispel a distrust they've accumulated from past failures. Instead, it's inspired a different disposition.

"I'm fighting for anyone who sought justice and was instead met with indifference," Jane Doe said in her 2020 journal reflection. "For those who are afraid to share their stories."

Review: Catholic Church abuse and Tennessee court battles

Jane Doe's lawsuit is among several ongoing cases against Catholic leaders in Tennessee over abuse and that have emerged in just the past few years. Here's a review of those cases and the key players.

- Lawsuit against the Archdiocese of Philadelphia following alleged abuse by Kevin McGoldrick during his tenure as chaplain for Aquinas College in Nashville. The suit claims Philadelphia church leaders were aware of a history of misconduct by McGoldrick before he moved to Nashville. McGoldrick lives in Nashville and is now barred from ministry in the Catholic church.
- Two different lawsuits against the Catholic Diocese of Knoxville over abuse by a former seminarian and by a Gatlinburg priest, and former Knoxville Bishop Richard Stika's mishandling of both cases. Controversy sparked by these lawsuits along with subsequent revelations in Knoxville News Sentinel reports preceded Stika's resignation last year. The same attorney representing Jane Doe in her suit against the Nashville Diocese, Patrick Thronson, is representing the alleged victim in one of these Knoxville cases.
- A new lawsuit against the Catholic Diocese of Memphis over alleged abuse by now deceased priest Joel Wiggs. The same Baltimore law firm that took on Jane Doe's lawsuit against the Nashville Diocese and in one of the Knoxville Dioceses is representing the alleged victim in this Memphis suit.

■ A criminal case against Juan Carlos Garcia, a former associate pastor at St. Phillip Catholic Church in Franklin. The criminal case is in its infancy following Garcia's arrest earlier this year.

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