

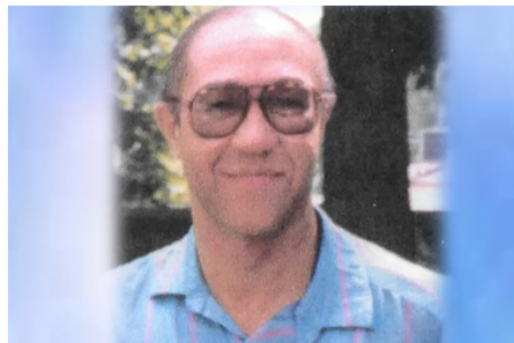
OBITUARY — ABUSE — BLACK MEN — BLACK PRIESTS — FRANCISCANS — WASHINGTON DC — MILWAUKEE — CHICAGO — RELIGIOUS LIFE — CRIME — WISCONSIN — ILLINOIS

Kenneth C. Stewart, former accused Capuchin, dead at 83

The 45-year Franciscan priest was accused of child sex abuse dating to the 1970s and removed from ministry in 2004. He was laicized after leaving the order.

NATE TINNER-WILLIAMS

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(Stewart family)

Kenneth C. Stewart, a former Capuchin Franciscan priest and the first Black pastor in the history of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, died on July 22, according to an obituary announcement in Virginia Beach. He was 83 years old and suffered from dementia in his last years.

His funeral was held on August 23 at his family's parish, the Basilica of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception in Norfolk, where the priest and his family spoke of mercy and forgiveness for a man described as an imperfect servant.

"He did his very best to do all the things that Jesus commanded to do, but he knew and God knew there were times when he just failed," said Fr. Jim Curran, the rector of the basilica and homilist for Stewart's funeral Mass.

"Ultimately, what makes us rejoice is not because he succeeded more often than he failed. What makes us rejoice is not that he was such a kind, gentle, giving, caring soul. What makes us rejoice is all the times that he failed to be those things, because that's when the mercy of God took over."

Stewart's niece, the only member of the family to give remarks during the liturgy, shared a post-Communion poem that spoke of a person who had "made a mess" of their life before a miraculous encounter with Jesus Christ.

Unspoken during the Mass were the specifics of Stewart's troubled past in the priesthood, from which he was laicized in his 60s. He had been credibly accused of child sexual abuse in the Diocese of Saginaw, where he served as a priest for just over a year beginning in June 1973.

It is unclear what specifically occasioned his departure from the parish, Queen of Angels Catholic Church.



(Archdiocese of Chicago/Stewart family)



Born in 1939, Stewart was raised in Washington, D.C., where he attended Holy Redeemer Catholic Church and Archbishop Carroll High. Following graduation, he went on to a short career in the bookstore industry before entering the Capuchin order in 1959.

Ordained in 1967, Stewart went on to serve at various parishes across the Midwest, including in Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana. He also served for three years in the U.S. Virgin Islands. During the first of two stints in Milwaukee, Stewart pastored St. Boniface Catholic Church, succeeding the famed activist-priest James Groppi, who was removed from the parish due to his justice work. Stewart thus became the first Black pastor in the history of the archdiocese.

Like Groppi, Stewart would later leave the priesthood, some thirty years after his departure from Saginaw. Stewart was one of several Capuchin priests of his province to be credibly accused of child sex abuse, whose names were listed in a self-audit publicized by the order in 2013. Stewart had been restricted from ministry by the Capuchins in 2004 and soon after left the community. He was listed as credibly accused in the Diocese of Saginaw in 2019.

Immediately following his time in Saginaw, Stewart became affiliated with the National Office of Black Catholics, then the liaison for African Americans to the nation's Catholic bishops. He went on to serve in short stints in Wisconsin and overseas, before being placed on administrative leave from 1987 to 1988. Several more short ministry assignments followed, with none lasting more than four years and some being only a few months.

Stewart was a resident of St. Fidelis Friary in Appleton, Wisconsin, at the time of his removal from ministry, and his whereabouts after leaving the order were unknown. Earlier this year, Stewart was listed in the Attorney General's Report on Catholic Clergy Child Sex Abuse in Illinois, which did not present any new information on his abuse.

Following his death, Stewart's remains were cremated. At his funeral in Norfolk, it was noted that his burial would take place at a later date. No further details were announced.

Nate Tinner-Williams is co-founder and editor of *Black Catholic Messenger*.