

JERSEY MAYHEM

# Former Oratory Prep chaplain charged with endangering children

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SUMMIT – An Oratory Prep chaplain, who was recently living in New Providence, has been charged with endangering six students at the Catholic private school.

Rev. Salvatore DiStefano, 61, who recently resided at Our Lady of Peace Parish on South Street in New Providence, was charged with five counts of second-degree use of a juvenile to commit a crime and six counts of third-degree endangering the welfare of a child, according to a news release from the Union County Prosecutor's Office.

DiStefano previously served as the chaplain of Oratory Preparatory School in Summit but was placed on leave in January pending the outcome of a criminal investigation. The investigation revealed

that he allegedly engaged in a pattern of behavior that threatened the welfare of six students.

The charges stem from DiStefano's conduct as the leader of an official school club of about 30 hand-picked Oratory Prep students, known as the "Knights of Malta," according to the release.

For instance, the investigation revealed that DiStefano would allegedly frequently attempt to speak with the students about sex and instructed a student to masturbate in order to relieve stress.

He also allegedly made repeated attempts to entice a student to accompany him away from the school alone and took steps to conceal that activity, such as telling the student to leave his cell phone at school so that his true location would be hidden from his parents when he met with him off-campus.

The investigation also found that DiStefano allegedly gave his personal cell phone number to club members, routinely texting and calling them outside of school hours, and instructing them to save his contact in their phones as "Malta" in order to conceal his identity.

The investigation revealed that, at various points in late 2019, "Father Sal," as he was known to students, would allow his teenaged victims to consume edible items infused with marijuana in his office, according

to the release.

He also allegedly purchased tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) cartridges, which students would smoke in DiStefano's office while he was present, and provided students money so they could purchase such items for themselves.

DiStefano took actions designed to maintain his control over the group, authorities said.

At one point, according to the investigation, DiStefano attempted to convince multiple students to harass and otherwise intimidate a former Knights of Malta member who had been dismissed from the club, ordering them to make the victim's daily life so difficult that he would quit school.

These alleged efforts included convincing one student to post false negative information about the other student on social media.

In another instance, when DiStefano learned that the former club member was hosting a party, he allegedly instructed current club members to plan a party for the same night so that no one would show up, ordering them to make a list of alcohol they wanted so he could buy it for them, according to authorities.

When students or others expressed concerns about his conduct to DiStefano, he also allegedly took steps to cover up his activities, such as telling one victim to delete all of the text messages between them from his phone.

This arrest was made by members of the Union County Prosecutor's Office assigned to the New Jersey Clergy Abuse Task Force, which was formed by Attorney General Gurbir S. Grewal in September 2018 to investigate allegations of clergy abuse. This is the fourth priest to be charged in criminal cases filed by the task force.

"I want to recognize Attorney General Grewal's Clergy Abuse Task Force and our Special Victims Unit for exhaustively and professionally investigating this case," acting Union County Prosecutor Lyndsay V. Ruotolo said in the release. "The conduct unearthed by our investigative team represents an egregious and total betrayal of trust by a person who was supposed to be helping young men, not hurting them; conduct that might have gone unchecked but for their efforts."

DiStefano was arrested without incident on Thursday and charged pending a first appearance and detention hearing scheduled to take place in Superior Court.

The Archdiocese of Newark and Oratory Preparatory School each cooperated with the Prosecutor's Office in its investigation, according to the release.

"Upon learning of the alleged conduct in January 2020, the Archdiocese of Newark immediately alerted civil authorities as per policy, removed Fr. DiStefano from his position at Oratory Prep and suspended him from serving in active parish ministry within the Archdiocese of Newark," Maria Margiotta, director of communications and public relations for the Archdiocese of Newark, said in a statement. "The Archdiocese continues to cooperate fully with the Union County Prosecutor's Office." She did not clarify if DiStefano would be barred from serving in active ministry.

"The Archdiocese of Newark emphasizes that the safety of minors and students is of utmost concern and that it will strictly follow policies and procedures in line with protecting the faithful and providing safe environments throughout the Archdiocese," Margiotta said.

Anyone with information regarding DiStefano's activities is urged to contact Union County Prosecutor's Office Lt. Timothy Durkin at 973-698-9529.

When Attorney General Grewal formed the Clergy

Abuse Task Force in September 2018, he established a Clergy Abuse Hotline – 855-363-6548 – which is staffed by trained professionals and operated on a 24/7 basis.

More than 600 calls have been received through the hotline to date.

Convictions on second-degree criminal offenses are commonly punishable by five to 10 years in state prison, while third-degree crimes can result in terms of three to five years.

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