

## Meet the Staff

### FATHER JAY MELLO, PASTOR



*Pastor* | Fr. Jay Mello, S.T.L. was born in Fall River on February 29, 1980. He grew up as a parishioner of Sts. Peter and Paul parish and attended the parish school. He graduated from Diman Regional Vocation Technical High School in 1998 from the culinary arts program. Fr. Jay was inducted into the High School's Hall of Fame in 2014. He attended the Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio, graduating in 2003 with a bachelor degrees in Philosophy and Theology and Religious Education. After graduation from the university, Fr. Jay was assigned to the Pontifical North American College in Rome for seminary formation. He

attended the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and earned a Sacred Theological Baccalaureate. On July 7, 2007 Fr. Jay was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop George Coleman at

Fr. Jay Mello, pastor of St. Michael and St. Joseph parishes in the Diocese of Fall River, Massachusetts, is pictured on the staff page of St. Joseph's website. He has been placed on administrative leave after allegations of sexual misconduct involving an adult. (NCR screenshot/stjosephschurchfr.com)



by Jenn Morson

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## **Join the Conversation**

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On the weekend of June 22-23, parishioners at [St. Michael](#) and [St. Joseph](#) parishes in Fall River, Massachusetts, [were informed via a letter](#) from Bishop Edgar da Cunha that their pastor, Fr. Jay Mello, was being put on leave for sexual misconduct allegations. The letter specified that no minors were involved and assured parishioners that he understood the gravity of the situation, writing, "This situation is distressing for all of us. Please know that my prayers are with all the faithful people of St. Michael and St. Joseph Parishes during this challenging time."



Posts on Facebook were overwhelmingly supportive of Fr. Jay Mello. (NCR screenshot/Jenn Morson)

Reports on the letter were shared by local news outlets, and a [separate letter](#) written by the superintendent of schools, Daniel Roy, was sent to parents of students who attend [St. Michael's parish school](#). This letter also assured recipients that no minors were involved. The letter stated that, "Father Mello has denied the allegations of priestly misconduct," while requesting prayers for Mello and all

involved. Roy also noted how "distressing" this news would be as Mello has been a "strong presence" at the school for almost ten years.

Comments on many news stories as well as social media posts were overwhelmingly supportive of Mello. Several parishioners changed their profile pictures to images with the priest and their children and other family members. Others have applied filters to their profile to add the words, "Pray for Father Jay." Mello's Facebook account has "liked" these images on his personal page.

Mello himself changed his profile picture the day after the letter was read to his parishioners to a graphic of a blue and yellow heart. At present, there are over a hundred comments imitating the hearts as well as some sharing the St. Michael Prayer. Others have shared their support and denounced the "haters" who they believe are anti-Catholic and targeting Mello for his popularity within the community.

Mello was a member of the [Diman Regional Voc-Tech School Committee](#) at the time these allegations were shared with parishioners, but he has since resigned. Additionally, he is the chaplain for the Fall River Police Department.

As the letter to the parishioners stated, Mello is not currently residing at the rectory. According to an unnamed priest of the Fall River Diocese, Mello is currently staying at a residence within the diocese. The priest told NCR that this is protocol both for the safety of the priest as well as for the safety of the community at large.

NCR spoke with one of the alleged victims of Mello, who shares that he first reported his experiences to the Diocese of Fall River in 2012, as well as to the Acushnet Police Department.

According to Jonathan\*, while he and Mello had both been seminarians at the same time for the Fall River Diocese, they did not interact prior to the time period during which the incident occurred.

After Jonathan finished college and spent some time living in Chicago, he returned home to the Fall River Diocese in 2010, where he continued to discern whether or not he was called to the priesthood. It was at this time that Jonathan decided to contact Mello, a fellow alumnus of Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio, then serving as a priest for St. Patrick's Parish in Falmouth, Massachusetts. "I knew he had also gone to Steubenville, was roughly my age, and he had some influence in the diocese, so I thought he could offer me direction," Jonathan said.



Posts on Facebook were overwhelmingly supportive of Fr. Jay Mello. (NCR screenshot/Jenn Morson)

As of June 24, the Franciscan University of Steubenville had removed Mello's speaker profile from their conference website as well as removed links to his talks on YouTube. Conference recordings previously available for purchase had also been removed from their online store.

According to Jonathan, the two struck up a friendship and spent time together, going out for meals and drinks. Jonathan said, "I was hanging out with him, but looking back, it felt like we were going on dates. He was always paying, and I was confused by this as an approach to help me discern."

At some point, Jonathan says he informed Mello that he was no longer interested in becoming a diocesan priest and that he was pursuing religious life, but that his student loan debt was a hindrance. According to Jonathan, Mello told him that he could connect him with wealthy donors that could pay off his debts.

Jonathan says that on several occasions, he traveled from his residence in Mattapoisett to the rectory in Falmouth to socialize with Mello and drink, but because Jonathan did not have a place to stay, he did not frequently do so.

Despite feeling increasingly uncomfortable with Mello, Jonathan says he felt obligated. "I was in a Catch-22 situation," he said. "Because he was continuing to [promise to] introduce me to people who could help me with my debt."

Their friendship abruptly came to an end, however, during the Christmas season when Jonathan says that Mello invited him to come over to the rectory of St. Francis Xavier Parish in Acushnet, where Mello was staying while the pastor was out of town. According to Jonathan, he was due to work later that night, but Mello appealed to their shared love of cooking. "I had just bought this Julia Child book, and we had been discussing a particular chicken dish," Jonathan said. "So I said I would come over and make it, but then I would need to go to work."

After stopping at the grocery store for ingredients, Jonathan said that he and Mello cooked the meal together. There was wine which they were both drinking, but Jonathan said he only had half a glass because he needed to go to work after dinner. After they had eaten, Jonathan said that the two men went upstairs to a sitting room and were having a conversation about pastoral care to gay people as well as the church's position. "Eventually, it became time for me to leave," Jonathan said, "but he said, 'Before you go, let me show you what the priest who lives here did with the guest rooms.' "

At this time, Jonathan said that Mello led him to the first room, which had been converted into a chapel. "I remember thinking, 'Why do you need a chapel with the church 10 feet away?' " Jonathan told NCR.

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But then, Jonathan said the two men walked into the second room. "I was just standing in the room, scanning it as one does, and Jay pushed me down on the bed," Jonathan said. "I landed on my back, face up, and he landed on top of me."

"I thought, 'Whoa, what is happening right now?' " Jonathan said. "My clothes were on, his clothes were on, and he was kissing my face and biting my face, and inside I just screamed for him to get off of me, but he wasn't taking no for an answer."

Jonathan said that despite being in better physical shape than Mello, the weight of his body made it difficult to shimmy away. "Then he was grabbing my crotch and saying, 'It doesn't feel like you want me to stop' but I couldn't muster the strength to make him stop," he said.

Next, Jonathan said that in order to get Mello to stop, he put his hands around his neck. "I remember thinking, 'What would his parishioners think if I hit him and he had a black eye at Christmas Eve Mass?' " he said. "And he didn't back off until I held his neck and he started to turn blue."

Jonathan said he was able to get away from Mello, and he fled through the backdoor, in shock. It would be months before he decided that he needed to share what had happened with someone. "It just left my mind until months later when I was at Mass, and my former spiritual director was preaching that day," Jonathan said. "He said something about St. Teresa of Avila's feast day and a lightbulb went off. I knew I had to tell somebody about this."

Because Jonathan knew of Mello's connections within the diocese, he reached out to [Fr. Greg Mathias](#) who had served at St. Julie Billiart in Dartmouth alongside Mello.



Bishop George Coleman of Fall River, Massachusetts, joins fellow bishops during the opening prayer of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' general meeting Nov. 10, 2003, in Washington. (CNS/Bob Roller)

In April 2012, Jonathan spoke with Mathias, who was about to be appointed vicar general of the diocese. According to Jonathan, Mathias told him that he would arrange a meeting with Bishop George Coleman, [then-bishop of Fall River](#).

After their meeting, however, Mathias stayed in touch with Jonathan via email. In one email obtained by NCR dated May 22, 2012, Mathias conveyed to Jonathan that the bishop was struggling with how to handle the issue. Mathias asked if there were others who could corroborate Jonathan's story and said, "The idea is behind this is to ensure this guy gets help confronting his issues before it really gets him (and the Church) in trouble. (as if we don't already have enough)."

But in a follow-up email obtained by NCR dated July 17, 2012, Mathias contacted Jonathan to let him know that Mello had been confronted with the accusations. "I can

tell you that the Bishop has confronted him on the matter you presented and an arrangement has been made for counseling on the matter. Whether it actually works and gets him to deal with his issues, only time will tell."

When asked for comment on whether or not the diocese was aware of the arranged counseling, a representative responded, "As the investigation of Father Jay Mello is ongoing, the Diocese of Fall River is not able to share additional information beyond that which is provided in our diocesan statements." Mello did not respond to NCR's request for comment.



St. Michael Church in Fall River, Massachusetts, is seen in a photo taken June 27. Fr. Jay Mello, pastor of St. Michael and St. Joseph parishes in the Diocese of Fall River, has been placed on administrative leave after allegations of sexual misconduct involving an adult. (OSV News/Brian Fraga)

Jonathan then reached out to an attorney who encouraged him to file a police report. He was interviewed by a Massachusetts state trooper as well as by a local district

attorney who he says both advised him that this was a "he said, he said" case that would be difficult to investigate. "I thought to myself, 'Well enough of this has been shared and hopefully [the diocese] is keeping a watchful eye on Jay Mello,' " Jonathan told NCR. "I was also trying to move on with my life."

Several years had passed when Jonathan stumbled across an article which described an [initiative Mello was launching](#) at his parish school. "That really triggered me," Jonathan said. "He was teaching a class for vulnerable boys now?"

At the prompting of a friend who was aware that Fall River had a new victim advocate, Jonathan reached out to [Carolyn Shipp](#), director of Save Environment and Victim Assistance for the Diocese of Fall River. Jonathan met with Shipp as well as Detective Sergeant Tom Mauretti, delegate of investigations.

On June 1, 2023, for over three hours, Jonathan detailed his background in the church as a former seminarian as well as the details of the alleged incident that took place between Jonathan and Mello.

For the past year, Jonathan says he has periodically checked in with the investigators, and they have reached out at least once to say that they had not forgotten him and were still looking into the matter.

On June 21, Mauretti called Jonathan and notified him that Mello was being put on administrative leave. "Tom told me, 'It wasn't your case that put him on leave.' He said something like my case isn't provable," Jonathan said.

Moving forward, Jonathan is glad that the allegations against Mello are being investigated and taken seriously.

"I don't want to ruin his life. I don't think of him in anger, but more from a sense of pity," Jonathan said. "This doesn't bring me delight. What would bring me delight is an apology, restitution from the diocese, and for him to spend his life free from suffering as well."

*\*The victim has requested anonymity as this is an ongoing legal process. His name has been changed to protect his identity.*

A version of this story appeared in the **August 2-15, 2024** print issue under the headline: Parishioners rally behind priest put on leave for alleged sexual misconduct.