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For more than four decades, leaders of Second Harvest food bank and the Catholic Church in New Orleans had been partners in fighting hunger.

Then a dispute over money and control went nuclear.

Using a clause in the food bank's bylaws, Archbishop Gregory Aymond fired the longtime executive director, Natalie Jayroe, and several board members of Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater New Orleans and Acadiana last week, including the board chair, and installed the archdiocese's chief financial officer as the interim CEO.

The move led to allegations the archdiocese was trying to tap the reserves of Second Harvest — founded in 1982 as a Catholic ministry — seeking \$16 million to help defray the cost of its ongoing bankruptcy. Former board members say those funds came from donations and grants meant to feed the hungry and should be off-limits.

"That the Archbishop has chosen to ignore these realities and jeopardize Second Harvest's ability to fulfill its mission and honor its contracts is both shocking and short sighted," former board chair Bert Wilson said in a statement last week after being replaced.

Aymond [denies](#) that the archdiocese wants to use Second Harvest funds to pay off costs from the bankruptcy, which was [filed](#) in 2020 in response to more than 30 claims of sexual abuse. There are now more than 500 claims, [according to](#) the National Catholic Reporter.

Instead, Aymond said in a [video statement Monday](#) (Feb. 3), the \$16 million figure was floated during negotiations as the cost for Second Harvest to buy out assets owned by the church and become a separate organization. Those negotiations faltered, and the ongoing dispute led to what he called the "sad and difficult" decision to remove Second Harvest leaders.

"The characterizations of the archdiocese as stealing money from the hungry are completely false," he said. "The most difficult part of this is that it may have been preventable if the parties, including myself, would have put aside our pride and negotiated in good faith without threats of litigation."

Aymond's statement comes at a time when the archdiocese is struggling to move forward from the abuse scandal. Negotiations on a [settlement](#) with abuse victims remain stalled. A church reorganization plan, filed last fall, proposed offering \$113,600 to each abuse survivor, for a total of \$62.5 million, reported the Times-Picayune newspaper, while survivors have asked for \$1.8 million per abuse case. The Associated Press [also reported](#) that the archdiocese sought the aid of the New

Orleans Saints football team in trying to do damage control during the abuse crisis — leading to anger against church leaders and the team.

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Church leaders have insisted Second Harvest will continue to focus on feeding the hungry under its new leadership. "Not a single dollar from donor donations has ever been used for anything other than the mission of Second Harvest," Aymond said in his video.

Both sides admit the ongoing bankruptcy played a role in the leadership change. The archdiocese and a number of New Orleans Catholic groups had signed a "tolling agreement," which kept them from being sued while bankruptcy negotiations continued. That agreement is set to expire this spring — and Second Harvest had a Jan. 31 deadline to sign a renewal.

The archdiocese said that because former leaders refused to sign, they needed to go.

Nick Karl, one of the ousted board members, said Second Harvest leaders had not refused to sign but were still reviewing the renewal when they were ousted. He also said there was no rush to sign, since the [current agreement](#) remains in place until May.

"That the Archdiocese jumped the gun by terminating three longtime board members and the non-profit's CEO speaks volumes regarding their motivations," Karl said in a statement.

Karl also said the archdiocese's claim that no funds had been used for the bankruptcy was misleading.

"That statement is only true because of the resolve of the now terminated CEO and three board members who were steadfast in their opposition to paying for abuse claims that were none of Second Harvest's doing," he said.

Second Harvest's 2024 [audit showed](#) \$89 million in net assets, including \$32 million in investments, and \$102 million in revenue. The charity's bylaws describe the archbishop as the group's "sole member" and give him the authority to appoint and

remove board members and the CEO.

Neither Second Harvest nor the Archdiocese of New Orleans responded to requests for comment, including on a question of whether or not the archbishop had exercised his authority over board members and staff in the past.

In his video, Aymond said he took responsibility for what he called the "confusion" over the changes at Second Harvest and said the dispute should have been handled differently.

Adam Joyce, interim director of the Axelson Center for Nonprofit Management at North Park University in Chicago, said it's not uncommon for religious leaders to have some say over board members at faith-based nonprofits. And at times, a religious leader might intervene if a nonprofit is failing or in trouble — but that does not seem to be the case at Second Harvest.

Firing board members or staff was the "nuclear option," he said.

"This is not the diocese helping Second Harvest fulfill its mission," Joyce said. "It sounds like it's something very different."

The Second Harvest in New Orleans is part of a [network](#) of about 200 food banks affiliated with Feeding America, a Chicago-based national nonprofit. While many have ties to faith groups, a review of the financial disclosures of those food banks showed only four cases where a church leader had authority over the group's board. In all four, the food bank is under the authority of a Catholic diocese or archdiocese.

Feeding America declined to comment about the specifics of the dispute in New Orleans, saying the focus should remain on helping people in need.