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This Dec. 1, 2012 file photo shows a silhouette of a crucifix and a stained glass window inside a Catholic Church in New Orleans. In April 2024, Louisiana State Police carried out a sweeping search warrant at the Archdiocese of New Orleans, seeking a long-secreted cache of church records and communications between local church leaders and the Vatican about the church's handling of clergy sexual abuse. (AP/Gerald Herbert)

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New Orleans — May 2, 2024

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Authorities have expanded an investigation of clergy sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church in New Orleans to include senior church officials suspected of shielding predatory priests for decades and failing to report their crimes to law enforcement.

Louisiana State Police carried out a sweeping search warrant last week at the Archdiocese of New Orleans, seeking a long-secreted cache of church records and communications between local church leaders and the Vatican about the church's handling of clergy sexual abuse.

The search signaled a new phase of the investigation that will seek to determine what particular church leaders, including Archbishop Gregory Aymond and his predecessors, knew about claims that the warrant describes as "ignored and in many cases covered up."

"The Archdiocese of New Orleans has been openly discussing the topic of sex abuse for over 20 years," Bill Kearney, an archdiocese spokesman, said in a statement. "In keeping with this, we also are committed to working with law enforcement in these endeavors."

The warrant contained several new details about the sex-trafficking investigation, including claims that some victims were sexually assaulted in a seminary swimming pool after being ordered to "skinny dip." Separately, the warrant says, predatory priests developed a system of sharing victims by giving them "gifts" that they were instructed to pass on to clergymen at other schools or churches.

"It was said that the 'gift' was a form of signaling to another priest that the person was a target for sexual abuse," state police investigator Scott Rodrigue wrote in an affidavit in support of the warrant.



FILE - Members of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, including Richard Windmann, left, and John Gianoli, right, hold signs during a conference in front of the New Orleans Saints training facility in Metairie, La., Wednesday Jan. 29, 2020. In April 2024, Louisiana State Police carried out a sweeping search warrant at the Archdiocese of New Orleans, seeking a long-secreted cache of church records and communications between local church leaders and the Vatican about the church's handling of clergy sexual abuse. (AP/Matthew Hinton)

The warrant sought an exhaustive range of personnel records, "files contained in any and all safes" and documents showing the extent to which the archdiocese continued supporting clergymen even after they were added to the so-called credibly accused list of suspected predators.

The warrant also confirmed a parallel FBI examination of clergy sexual abuse reported by The Associated Press nearly two years ago. That investigation has examined whether priests took children across state lines to molest them.

"No one and no institution is above the law, especially when we are talking about protecting children from the horrors of child sexual abuse," said Kathryn Robb, executive director of Child USA Advocacy, a nonprofit that advocates on behalf of child sexual abuse accusers. "This warrant is the necessary muscle of the criminal system to protect children."

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Many of the most explosive church records surfaced in a flood of sexual abuse lawsuits that drove the archdiocese to seek Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection four years ago. The documents chronicle years of abuse claims, interviews with accused clergy and a pattern of church leaders transferring problem priests, but they have been shielded under a sweeping confidentiality order in the bankruptcy case that has long hampered the state and federal investigations.

"We have been forced, against our own professional obligations, to keep them secret," said attorneys Richard Trahan, Soren Gisleson and John Denenea, who represent the accusers.

The Vatican did not respond to a request for comment Wednesday and rarely weighs in on developments in local clergy abuse cases. But for decades, the message from Rome to local church leaders was to keep clergy abuse files in the secret archives.

To date, the Vatican still has not required abuse cases to be reported to police around the world, though it now says local church leaders should comply with whatever civil reporting laws are in place. In addition, as the clergy abuse scandal has continued to cause a credibility crisis for the Catholic hierarchy worldwide, Pope Francis in 2019 removed the top-level secrecy that covered abuse cases, known as the pontifical secret.

Prior to that, local church leaders regularly invoked the pontifical secret as a reason to resist criminal subpoenas. In theory, the removal of the secret removed any official barrier to such cooperation.

In New Orleans, the search could deepen the legal peril for church leaders, exposing them to potential state court prosecutions even as the U.S. Justice Department has struggled to identify federally prosecutable crimes related to clergy sexual abuse.

Last year, an Orleans Parish grand jury indicted Lawrence Hecker, a now-92-year-old disgraced priest, on charges accusing him of sexually assaulting a teenage boy in 1975 — an extraordinary prosecution that prompted the broader search of the archdiocese last week.

Hecker has pleaded not guilty to counts of rape, kidnapping, aggravated crime against nature and theft. He is accused of choking the teen unconscious under the guise of performing a wrestling move and sexually assaulting him.

The archdiocese failed to report Hecker's admissions to law enforcement while permitting him to work around children until he quietly left the ministry in 2002. Church officials reassigned Hecker even after he was sent to a psychiatric facility in Pennsylvania and "diagnosed as a pedophile," the warrant says.

"Hecker was not the only member of the archdiocese sent to receive psychiatric testing based on allegations of child sexual abuse," Rodrigue wrote in the warrant.

The age of the Hecker case presents legal and evidentiary hurdles for prosecutors, who also face the political sensitivity of prosecuting a longtime clergyman in heavily Catholic New Orleans. Many predator priests have escaped criminal consequences in Louisiana for those reasons, making the scope of last week's search even more notable.

One high-profile exception came in 2019 in the case of George F. Brignac, a longtime deacon and schoolteacher charged with sexually assaulting a then-altar boy in the 1970s. Brignac died in 2020 while awaiting trial at the age of 85. He had pleaded not guilty.

Litigation involving Brignac turned up thousands of still-secret emails documenting behind-the-scenes public relations work that New Orleans Saints executives did for the archdiocese in 2018 and 2019 to contain fallout from clergy abuse scandals.

Associated Press reporter Nicole Winfield contributed from Rome.