News

St. Peter Catholic Church in Steubenville, Ohio, is pictured in an Aug. 22, 2024, photo. Father Bradley Greer, chancellor of the Diocese of Steubenville, and Father Timothy Huffman, parochial vicar at St. Peter, are seeking legal custody of a small child from a family in homelessness in an unusual case scheduled for a juvenile court hearing in October. (OSV News/Christopher Dacanay)

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Steubenville, Ohio — August 27, 2024
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In an unusual case, two priests in Steubenville, Ohio, are fighting for legal custody of a toddler who is presently under their care.

Father Bradley Greer, chancellor of the Diocese of Steubenville, Ohio, and Father Timothy Huffman, parochial vicar at St. Peter Catholic Church (where Father Greer is pastor) in Steubenville, filed for legal custody of a then 7-month-old child in December 2022. OSV News is not identifying the child whose information is listed on publicly accessible court documents.

In their legal motion, the priests told the Jefferson County Court of Common Pleas that the two had been "significant caregivers" since the child was "approximately two months old." They alleged a pattern of neglect and negligence of the infant by its mother, Jorden Pauley, including referring to the child as "a little bastard," watering down the child's formula due to not having enough supply, and feeding the child age-inappropriate foods, such as chocolate and cantaloupe. The priests claim, "The parents are unstable and do not provide adequate support and care for the child."

Through court-ordered genetic testing, Jorden Pauley's husband, Edgar Pauley, was subsequently ruled out as the child's biological father, whose identity is not specified in the available court documents.

Jorden Pauley's mother, Brenda Tarutis, has since filed as an intervenor in the case, which has now been transferred from domestic to juvenile court.

In an April 2023 ruling on behalf of Judge Joseph J. Bruzzese Jr., magistrate Maresa Baes Taylor determined that Greer and Huffman "as nonrelatives ... lack standing" in the case; nonetheless, the priests filed an appeal, with the case ultimately being transferred to the juvenile court for further proceedings.

The 18-month long legal battle over the child's custody is the result of "a ridiculously convoluted back pattern," attorney Craig J. Allen, who represents Tarutis, told OSV

News.

But mapping the full details of that pattern is a challenge, since most of the parties involved in the case have remained largely silent.

Neither of the two priests has responded to multiple phone and email requests for comment from OSV News. A woman who answered the phone for one of their lawyers, Francesca Carinci, declined to comment. Calls to the priests' other named attorney, Mary F. Corabi, rang unanswered.

OSV News also has reached out to Jorden Pauley for comment and is awaiting a response.

In an interview published Aug. 11 by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, the 23-year-old Pauley — who now also has two daughters, ages 1 year and 3 months, with her husband — said, "I feel like this (custody petition) is a very wrong thing for Catholics to do. I've never seen two people in the Catholic community want someone's child that bad ... they've torn my family apart."

Allen, Tarutis' attorney, told OSV News that his client has "stated from the beginning" that she wants her grandchild to know the child's family in eastern Pennsylvania and to make sure she and her grandchild have a connection to each other.

He added that Tarutis is "walking a line with Huffman and Greer" to maintain "at least an amicable, communication-rich relationship" with the priests so as to ensure visitation with the child.

The Diocese of Steubenville told OSV News that it "does not comment on pending legal matters.

"However, the diocese is confident that Father Bradley Greer and Father Timothy Huffman are in compliance with the child protection policies of the Diocese of Steubenville because they are the court-ordered legal custodians of the minor child," said the diocese.

The current apostolic administrator, Bishop Edward M. Lohse of Kalamazoo, Michigan, also declined to comment, with his office advising OSV News by email that "there are no additional statements" from the bishop.

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The motion for custody filed by the priests states the Pauleys had moved to Jefferson County, Ohio, from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in the spring of 2022 and had sought assistance from the Friendship Room, a homelessness outreach in Steubenville located within a minute's walk of St. Peter Church.

The nonprofit's founder and president Molly McGovern — whose assistant, Katie Kissinger, told OSV News McGovern "has no comment" on the case — invited the priests to help out with the child, whom the couple had dropped off for care at the Friendship Room several times after the family became homeless, according to the motion.

The drop-offs continued even after McGovern had secured an apartment and a car for the family, and the priests continued to assist in caring for the child, said the court documents.

According to the priests' motion for custody, in early July 2022, the child — with the Pauleys' consent — stayed with the priests for one week, during which time the priests contacted Michele Santin, director of the Jefferson County agency of Ohio's Department of Job and Family Services, with whom they had "lots of conversations." Santin's office "was of no help to the plaintiffs or the child," said the documents.

Santin told OSV News she had "no comment" on the matter.

The priests then contacted the Steubenville Police Department, but the child was ultimately returned to the parents — only to be voluntarily dropped off again with the priests, who at the time of the legal filing claimed the child's stays had become regular, with the child at the rectory "31 out of 38 days" between early November 2022 and the time of the December 2022 court filing.

The priests claimed in the filing that "the rectory was set up for the child," and that they have "provided care for the child on a regular basis … fed the child, provided (the child) food, bought (the child) clothes and diapers, changed (the child's) diapers and gotten up at night with (the child)."

The priests described in their filing having provided the Pauleys — on at least three occasions — approximately $1,400 worth of food, medicine and basic necessities.

In a follow-up email for Lohse sent to the Diocese of Kalamazoo Aug. 22, OSV News asked whether the Diocese of Steubenville is "funding this child's care or covering this child under insurance policies, including health care and accidental death insurance." OSV News did not receive an immediate response.

Yet the priests' caretaking efforts of the child would appear to conflict openly with the Diocese of Steubenville's current safe environment policy, which states that "no child may visit overnight in a rectory (or other residence of a diocesan priest), or stay overnight with a diocesan priest in any other place, unless in the company of his or her parent or guardian."

The policy notes that "an exception can be made when the child is a close relative of the priest, but even this is discouraged."

In addition, "a cleric, employee, or regular volunteer must obtain the written consent of the child's parent or guardian before inviting or allowing a child to visit in the adult's home," the policy states, adding that consent can be waived "in the event that the adult has little or no advance notice of the visit and another adult is present."

However, Allen told OSV News that the placement of the child with the priests "has not been a secret" among diocesan officials, sending the message "the church is OK with it."

OSV News' Aug. 22 email to Lohse — which did not receive an immediate response — also asked for clarification about whether "priests involved in providing childcare — such as babysitting or having direct custody of children" were permitted under either the Steubenville or Kalamazoo dioceses' Safe Environment policies. OSV News also asked in that email whether the bishop had received any kind of plan or given instructions for the child's long-term future under the priests' care.

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a widely consulted research and philanthropic institution that has informed child welfare policies at various public and private agencies throughout the nation for decades, "most child welfare professionals agree that placing children with appropriate kin is the best living situation for children whose parents aren't able to care for them safely at home."

According to the foundation, such kinship placements for a child are more likely to reduce trauma and mental health issues, while preserving greater stability, cultural

identity and social connections.

The next court hearing in the case is scheduled for October.