

Former Deacon Excommunicated After His Son Is Sexually Abused by a Priest

A Louisiana priest was convicted in the sexual abuse of the ex-deacon's son. What followed was a lawsuit and now the Catholic Church's highest censure.



By Emily Schmall

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A Catholic priest who sexually assaulted an altar boy in Louisiana is in prison, and a diocese has paid a settlement to the victim's family. Now the diocese's bishop has punished the victim's father, a former deacon, with the Church's highest censure: excommunication.

It was the latest turn in a yearslong battle pitting the former deacon, Scott Peyton, and his family against the Diocese of Lafayette.

The Peytons and the diocese have found themselves on opposing sides of a state law that gave childhood sexual abuse victims more time to file lawsuits.

The law, which was passed in the State Legislature in 2021 but struck down on Friday by the state's highest court, did not apply exclusively to victims of clergy abuse. However, the law prompted new civil suits against Louisiana churches and clergy members who worked for them.

The battle has its roots in 2018, when Mr. Peyton's son Oliver accused the parish priest at St. Peter Catholic Church in Morrow of sexually assaulting him three years earlier, when he was 16. Scott Peyton served the same priest, Father Michael Guidry, as a deacon.

While the St. Landry Parish Sheriff's Office investigated the allegations, Father Guidry was suspended from his church duties and later confessed to the assault, according to court records.

In a deposition, Father Guidry said that the abuse occurred when Oliver Peyton came to the rectory for "spiritual counseling."

"Even though the priest confessed, we were shunned by members of our community," Mr. Peyton said, adding that he and his family felt compelled to move to another church in the diocese.

In April 2019, Father Guidry was sentenced to seven years in prison for molesting a juvenile and prohibited from having any contact with the Peytons or with anyone under the age of 18, according to court records.

The diocese said in 2019 that Father Guidry had been "removed from ministry," but it was not immediately clear whether he was defrocked. In March 2021, the Peytons won a settlement for an undisclosed sum in a lawsuit against Father Guidry and the Diocese of Lafayette.

Mr. Peyton, who was ordained a deacon in 2012, resigned from the diaconate on Dec. 4, 2023. Mr. Peyton also informed the bishop, J. Douglas Deshotel, that the Peyton family was leaving the Catholic Church.

The bishop responded a day later, wishing Mr. Peyton well and saying that, sacramentally, he would remain a deacon. But on March 13, the bishop wrote Mr. Peyton to say he had been excommunicated.

"I am aware that your family has suffered a trauma, but the answer does not lie in leaving the Most Holy Eucharist," Bishop Deshotel wrote. Fuck you, Padre.

Mr. Peyton said that he would not appeal the decree, which prohibits him from receiving holy communion and otherwise participating in the Catholic Church. "We've endured enough," he said.

“What he did to my family with this excommunication proves the point of why I left,” he added, referring to the bishop. “It’s an institution that wants to punish those that speak out against it.”

Many Catholics believe that those who are excommunicated die in a state of sin.

“He’s basically condemned me to go to hell,” said Mr. Peyton, who with his family, ^{Right.} has joined an Anglican church about an hour from where they live.

Bishop Deshotel and a lawyer for the diocese, Gilbert Dozier, could not be reached for comment.

As for why he did not resign immediately after the sexual abuse allegations first surfaced, Mr. Peyton said he saw that being a deacon as his vocation. The Peytons ultimately decided that, to move on and heal, they’d need to leave the Catholic Church for good.

“We bounced around from one church to the next, trying to find that home, but you become that stigma,” Mr. Peyton’s wife, Letitia, said.

In April 2019, Bishop Deshotel published a list of dozens of clergy members who had been employed in the diocese and who had been “credibly accused of sexual abuse of a minor or a vulnerable adult” in the past century.

Among those on the list was Gilbert Gauthé, a priest who pleaded guilty in the 1980s to sexually abusing at least 37 children. The church defrocked him and paid more than \$10 million to settle lawsuits brought by victims.

Mr. Peyton said, that to the best of his knowledge, none of the clergy members in the Diocese of Lafayette who were accused of sexual abuse have been excommunicated.
↳ Who is going to Hell now?

During the criminal case against Father Guidry and the lawsuit, the Peytons became vocal supporters of a state law that allowed childhood sex abuse victims to pursue civil damages regardless of how long ago the offenses occurred.

Letitia Peyton testified in favor of the law before state lawmakers. She and her husband founded TentMakers, a nonprofit to support survivors of sexual abuse by members of the Catholic clergy.

Their activism likely encouraged other abuse victims to come forward, said Kristi Schubert, the lawyer in their civil case. She said she also represented at least five people with sexual abuse claims against the diocese.

Mr. Peyton's excommunication could have a chilling effect, Ms. Schubert said.

"Excommunicating Scott Peyton sends a message to abuse survivors that speaking out against child sex abusers is not safe to do," she said.

In January, the Diocese of Lafayette challenged the so-called lookback law in Louisiana's highest court, which on Friday said the law violated constitutional due process rights.

If it had been upheld, the Diocese of New Orleans, which has been in bankruptcy for nearly four years, in seeking protection from dozens of lawsuits related to sexual abuse claims, would have been potentially open to millions of dollars in additional claims.

Ms. Schubert said that the Diocese of Lafayette's appeal was likely strategic and meant to discourage other victims from coming forward.

"The Diocese of Lafayette stood to lose millions and millions of dollars," she said.

And it should have.

Emily Schmall is a correspondent for The Times. More about Emily Schmall