

Vatican congregation member allowed priest accused of child abuse to live near Catholic school

A bishop appointed last year to the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops allowed in 2000 a priest who sexually abused minors to live in a Chicago rectory around the corner from a Catholic school — in a residence Cardinal Blase Cupich later said was not appropriate for priests accused of abuse.



St. John Stone Augustinian Friary, Chicago.

The Vatican's Congregation for Bishops is charged with overseeing investigations into bishops accused of negligence, cover-ups, or improperly handling clerical sexual abuse allegations.

The Chicago Sun-Times reported Feb. 26 that in September 2000, Fr. James Ray was permitted to live at St. John Stone Friary, a house of the Chicago province of the Augustinian religious order. The friary is half a block from a parish elementary school.

According to diocesan records, the move required approval by now-Bishop Robert Prevost, who was then an Augustinian provincial superior.

Prevost, now a diocesan bishop in Peru, was received in a private audience by Pope Francis last month. He is widely reported to be a likely candidate for a senior position in Rome, or for a major archdiocese in the United States, in a slate of personnel changes expected from the pope in coming months.

Approving the move to a friary in close proximity to a Catholic school is not a violation of canon law. But similar moves have been criticized by victims' advocates in recent years, while they might once have raised few red flags among Church leaders.

And a public apology from Cardinal Cupich after a very similar situation in 2018 indicates the significant shift over recent decades in Church practice, public awareness, and internal expectations regarding the Church's handling of clerical sexual abusers.



Fr. James Ray. Credit: Archdiocese of Chicago

According to diocesan records reviewed by *The Pillar*, Ray had been restricted in ministry for nine years by 2000, and had been accused multiple times of sexually abusing boys, at least one of them for years. He had admitted to bringing at least one boy to sleep in his rectory bed, but said of one allegation that he “did not recall” having sexually assaulted a child with whom he admitted to having “cuddled.” Ray did admit to diocesan officials that in 1993 he engaged in sexual activity with a man while on a pilgrimage to Medjugorje, a supposed Marian apparition site in Croatia.

A July 2000 memo from a Chicago archdiocesan official indicates that the Augustinians at the friary said they would permit Ray to rent rooms in the building after they received permission from their provincial superior, Prevost. Ray actually moved in two months later.

The friary was the second choice of a residence for Ray, who was required to move in 2000 because of the pending sale of the diocesan property where he had been living under supervision. The first rectory proposed for his residence was rejected by the archdiocesan review board because it was on the same property as a parish school.

Archdiocesan records say the Augustinian residence was considered suitable for Ray because “there is no school in the immediate area.”

In fact, St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic elementary school is less than a block from the residence. But there is no record that archdiocesan officials who visited the site or Augustinian leaders raised that as a concern, even though a Catholic school principal had warned the archdiocese years earlier that Ray sometimes took children out of class, and that he was “touchytender” with some students.

When the Augustinians permitted Ray to live at the friary, records indicate they understood at least summarily what accusations the priest faced. Augustinian leaders met with diocesan officials to discuss Ray’s background, and an Augustinian in residence at the house agreed to monitor the priest’s compliance with the restrictions of his ministry set by the archdiocese, including that he not be alone with children.

At the time he moved into the friary, Ray was lobbying unsuccessfully that the restrictions of his ministry be loosened by the archdiocese; the priest hoped he would be permitted to assist in parishes on weekends and perform other regular sacramental ministry. An archdiocesan lay review board rejected his proposal for an expansion of ministry, but Ray was allowed to continue administrative work at Catholic Charities, fill in as a hospital chaplain, and to celebrate weddings and baptisms when he asked to do so. The priest also traveled regularly.

But administrators at St. Thomas the Apostle School were not notified that a priest accused of serial sexually abusing children was living in proximity to the parish elementary school, that he should not be allowed

to help out in the school or parish, or that he was not permitted to be alone with children.

The Augustinian Province of Our Mother of Good Counsel, based in Chicago, did not respond to questions from *The Pillar*. Prevost could not be reached for comment.

In 2002, as the clerical abuse scandal gained public attention, and the U.S. bishops passed policies on sexual abuse, Ray was moved from the friary. A formal canonical case was initiated against the priest, who was removed entirely from ministry. He was laicized in 2012, by that time facing even more allegations of child abuse.

Prevost became superior general of the Augustinian order in 2001. Having spent much of his ecclesiastical ministry as a missionary, the priest became a bishop in 2015.

In November 2020, Pope Francis named Prevost a member of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops, a move that surprised many Church watchers, given that Prevost is neither a cardinal nor even a metropolitan archbishop.

In an unusual twist, Prevost is not the only member of the Congregation for Bishops to permit a priest accused of sexually abusing a minor to reside at the same Augustinian house in Chicago. In 2018, Cardinal Blase Cupich, also a member of the congregation, apologized for allowing a

different priest accused of sexual abuse to live in the very same house, apparently, Cupich said, because of a miscommunication.

Fr. Richard McGrath, OSA, moved into the Augustinian's friary after he was accused in 2017 of possessing child pornography on his cell phone. But while McGrath refused to turn over his cell phone to authorities, police began investigating him for sexually abusing a high school student in the 1990s.

When it surfaced in September 2018 that McGrath was living in such close proximity to a Catholic elementary school, Cupich sent a letter of apology to the St. Thomas the Apostle parish and school communities, and said the priest would move immediately.

The cardinal said his office had not known that McGrath was under investigation for child abuse when it was notified he had moved to the friary. Had Cupich been fully aware of the situation, he said "we would not have permitted him to live there."

Cupich acknowledged that a priest accused of child abuse should not be living in such close proximity to a Catholic school. "The safety of your children is our highest priority," the cardinal said, "I apologize for the distress this situation has caused."

Cardinal Cupich, who became Chicago's archbishop in 2014, was appointed to the Congregation for Bishops in 2016.

Cupich has faced criticism for 2018 revelations that when he was bishop of Spokane, Washington, he did not object or issue warning about seven priests accused of sexual abuse who lived on the campus of Gonzaga University. The cardinal's apology for McGrath's residence at the Chicago friary came after the 2018 Pennsylvania grand jury report and Theodore McCarrick revelations, both of which heightened sensitivities concerning episcopal responses to sexually abusive priests.

Another American recently appointed to the congregation is Cardinal Joseph Tobin, Archbishop of Newark.

The Newark archdiocese was led from 1986 until 2000 by the now disgraced former cardinal McCarrick. Tobin has declined to release results of an internal investigation into McCarrick's long-time sexual abuse of seminarians, young priests, and minors, citing an ongoing investigation by New Jersey's attorney general. The cardinal has also declined to release records of archdiocesan funds controlled by McCarrick, which are thought likely to give indication of the ecclesiastical officials who might have protected the former cardinal.

Since 2019, the Congregation for Bishops has been charged with the oversight of investigations governed by *Vos estis lux mundi*, a set of policies from Pope Francis on investigating bishops alleged to have failed to properly handle clerical sexual abuse cases. The congregation has been criticized by some victims' advocates, who say that bishop members of

the congregation are not sufficiently distant from the kinds of cases they are charged with reviewing.

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