

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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January 25, 2021

**SENT VIA FAX AND U.S. MAIL  
(608)267-2779**

The Honorable Josh Kaul  
Attorney General of the State of Wisconsin  
P.O. Box 7857  
Madison, WI 53707-7857

Re: Request for state investigation into Roman Catholic Church for facilitating and actively concealing sex crimes against minors

Dear Attorney General Kaul:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to urge the Wisconsin Department of Justice to follow the lead of several other U.S. states and other countries by opening an investigation into the Roman Catholic Church for facilitating and concealing systemic sexual abuse. FFRF is a Madison-based national nonprofit organization with more than 33,000 members across the country, including more than 1,500 members in Wisconsin. FFRF's purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

As you may know, St. Norbert Abbey in De Pere, part of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Green Bay, in 2019 publicly disclosed a list of 22 priests who had been credibly accused of sexually abusing children.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, the Abbey revealed that it had been quietly paying one alleged victim, Nate Lindstrom, monthly checks, totaling more than \$400,000 over more than 10 years, in what Nate's parents said was to pay for counseling and medication that were necessary because of the abuse.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Haley BeMiller, *St. Norbert Abbey names 22 Norbertine priests known to have abused minors*, The Green Bay Press-Gazette (July 19, 2019), available at

[www.greenbaypressgazette.com/story/news/2019/07/19/clergy-abuse-st-norbert-abbey-names-22-norbertine-priests-who-abused-minors/1779500001/](http://www.greenbaypressgazette.com/story/news/2019/07/19/clergy-abuse-st-norbert-abbey-names-22-norbertine-priests-who-abused-minors/1779500001/).

<sup>2</sup> Haley BeMiller, *St. Norbert Abbey paid former student who reported priest sex abuse*, The Green Bay Press-Gazette (updated Jan. 7, 2021), available at

After the Abbey discontinued the payments, Nate reportedly fell into a deep depression that ultimately led to suicide.<sup>3</sup>

This widespread abuse, largely unreported to secular authorities, is not limited to St. Norbert Abbey or to the Diocese of Green Bay. Reporting by the Wisconsin affiliate of USA Today found that more than 150 priests who served in Wisconsin have been credibly accused of sexually assaulting children, with hundreds if not thousands of victims. Yet only 19 priests have been charged with crimes.<sup>4</sup>

Other states have taken action to address these widespread, institutionally covered-up crimes. A 1,400-page Pennsylvania grand jury report released in 2018 detailed thousands of instances of sexual abuse by clergy in six of the states' eight dioceses. The report revealed not only a staggering number of victims, offenses, and offenders, but also showed that the Catholic Church's secretive and imposing structure allowed hundreds of offenders to escape prosecution for decades.

This systemic sexual abuse and cover-up in the Catholic Church is global in scale. The governments of the Republic of Ireland and of Australia have both initiated and conducted national investigations into this epidemic, with Australia referring 2,500 cases to police after interviewing more than 8,000 abuse victims, and Ireland describing rape and molestation in schools operated by the Catholic Church as "endemic."

Twenty states besides Pennsylvania, as well as Washington, D.C., have investigated this issue since 2002.<sup>5</sup> It is time for Wisconsin to follow the lead of these states, and the nations of Ireland and Australia, and investigate this massive and coordinated abuse of minors throughout the country.

A multi-state investigation is especially fitting because the Church's "musical chairs" history of deliberately moving offenders to new locations—shielding them from local exposure and outrage, and providing them with fresh victims—creates an inter-state crisis that no individual state is equipped to handle. The Church has

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[www.greenbaypressgazette.com/in-depth/news/2020/12/03/st-norbert-abbey-paid-former-student-who-reported-priest-sex-abuse/6186892002/](http://www.greenbaypressgazette.com/in-depth/news/2020/12/03/st-norbert-abbey-paid-former-student-who-reported-priest-sex-abuse/6186892002/).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Haley BeMiller and Laura Schulte, *Wisconsin Catholic leaders vow to tell the truth on abusive priests, as victims call for state investigation*, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin (updated Jan. 7, 2021), available at [www.greenbaypressgazette.com/in-depth/news/2019/08/20/clergy-abuse-wisconsin-diocese-investigations-not-enough-victims-say/3211259002/](http://www.greenbaypressgazette.com/in-depth/news/2019/08/20/clergy-abuse-wisconsin-diocese-investigations-not-enough-victims-say/3211259002/).

<sup>5</sup> Source: CHILD USA. [childusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020-05-04-State-AGs-Investigating-Sexual-Abuse-in-Catholic-Church.pdf](http://childusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020-05-04-State-AGs-Investigating-Sexual-Abuse-in-Catholic-Church.pdf).

acted as though it has a license to sexually betray parishioners and turn its back on innocent victims, leaving a trail of devastation.

Even the Catholic Church itself has admitted that this is a global problem, with Pope Francis recently referring to a “culture of abuse” inside the Church.<sup>6</sup> In 2018, a study commissioned by the Church found that more than 3,600 children in Germany were assaulted by Catholic priests between 1946 and 2014.<sup>7</sup> Just two months ago, the Vatican released a 445-page report detailing myriad allegations of sexual assault against one former cardinal, Theodore McCarrick.<sup>8</sup> However, the pope’s predictable failure to provide any meaningful action to correct the problem confirms what FFRF and many other victims’ rights groups have asserted for decades: the methodical, organized sexual abuse in the Catholic Church will not stop until secular authorities intervene.

The Church’s claim of divine authority gives it coercive power over its congregants that allows it to get away with widespread crimes. Under Catholic Canon law, adherents are required to give a “religious submission of the intellect and will” to their church. For millennia the Church has used that power to suppress questions, doubts, and dissent. This leads to frequent unprosecuted crimes against child victims who are forced to remain silent by their parents under pressure from, and fear of, the Church. Undue deference has not only been shown by the faithful, but all too often by police, prosecutors and justices who have turned the other way when confronted with evidence of abuse. Compounding the cover-up is the active lobbying by the Catholic hierarchy to suppress reform of statutes of limitations in many states. The Church in New York state alone has spent close to \$2 million to lobby on its own behalf over civil actions and to fight statute-of-limitations reforms.

This structural protection for abusers is inherent in religion and helps explain why churches attract predators. This is a problem that is not limited to the Catholic Church, as demonstrated by FFRF’s tireless recording of clergy criminal acts in a column entitled “Black Collar Crime” in *Freethought Today*, FFRF’s newspaper, and publishing the first nonfiction book on the crime of clergy abuse of children in

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<sup>6</sup> Courtney Mares, *Pope Francis: ‘Never again to the culture of abuse,’* Catholic News Agency, available at [www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/never-again-to-the-culture-of-abuse-says-pope-francis-in-book-introduction-18108](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/never-again-to-the-culture-of-abuse-says-pope-francis-in-book-introduction-18108).

<sup>7</sup> *German Catholic priests ‘abused thousands of children,’* BBC (Sept. 12, 2018), available at [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45500072#:~:text=More%20than%203%2C600%20children%20in,be%20published%20on%2025%20September](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45500072#:~:text=More%20than%203%2C600%20children%20in,be%20published%20on%2025%20September).

<sup>8</sup> Report on the Holy See’s Institutional Knowledge and Decision-Making Related to Former Cardinal Theodore Edgar McCarrick (1930 to 2017), available at [www.vatican.va/resources/resources\\_rapporto-card-mccarrick\\_20201110\\_en.pdf](http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_rapporto-card-mccarrick_20201110_en.pdf). See also [www.patheos.com/blogs/freethoughtnow/vatican-abuse-report-is-far-too-little-too-late/](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/freethoughtnow/vatican-abuse-report-is-far-too-little-too-late/).

1988. Even compared with other churches, though, the Catholic Church has proven time and again to be uniquely callous toward victims, to exploit its hierarchical structure to cover up crimes and to be disproportionately represented among clergy abusers.

The Department of Justice should not sit idly by while a hyper-wealthy, tax-exempt organization facilitates the sexual abuse of hundreds of Wisconsin children, cites divine authority to silence victims, and works vigorously to protect both the abusers and the Church's coffers until the statutes of limitations have run out on the organization's child sex crimes. Catholic school students should not be thrust into an environment with a heightened risk of sexual abuse due to their parents' decision to provide a religious education for their children. Your office has the power and the responsibility to protect these families. For the sake of justice for our state's children, and to help prevent a tragedy like the one involving Nate Lindstrom from repeating itself, we urge you to immediately commence an investigation into the Catholic Church's cover-up and crimes against minors.

Very truly,

Handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Annie Laurie Gaylor Dan Barker".

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker  
Co-presidents

ALG/DB:rdj