

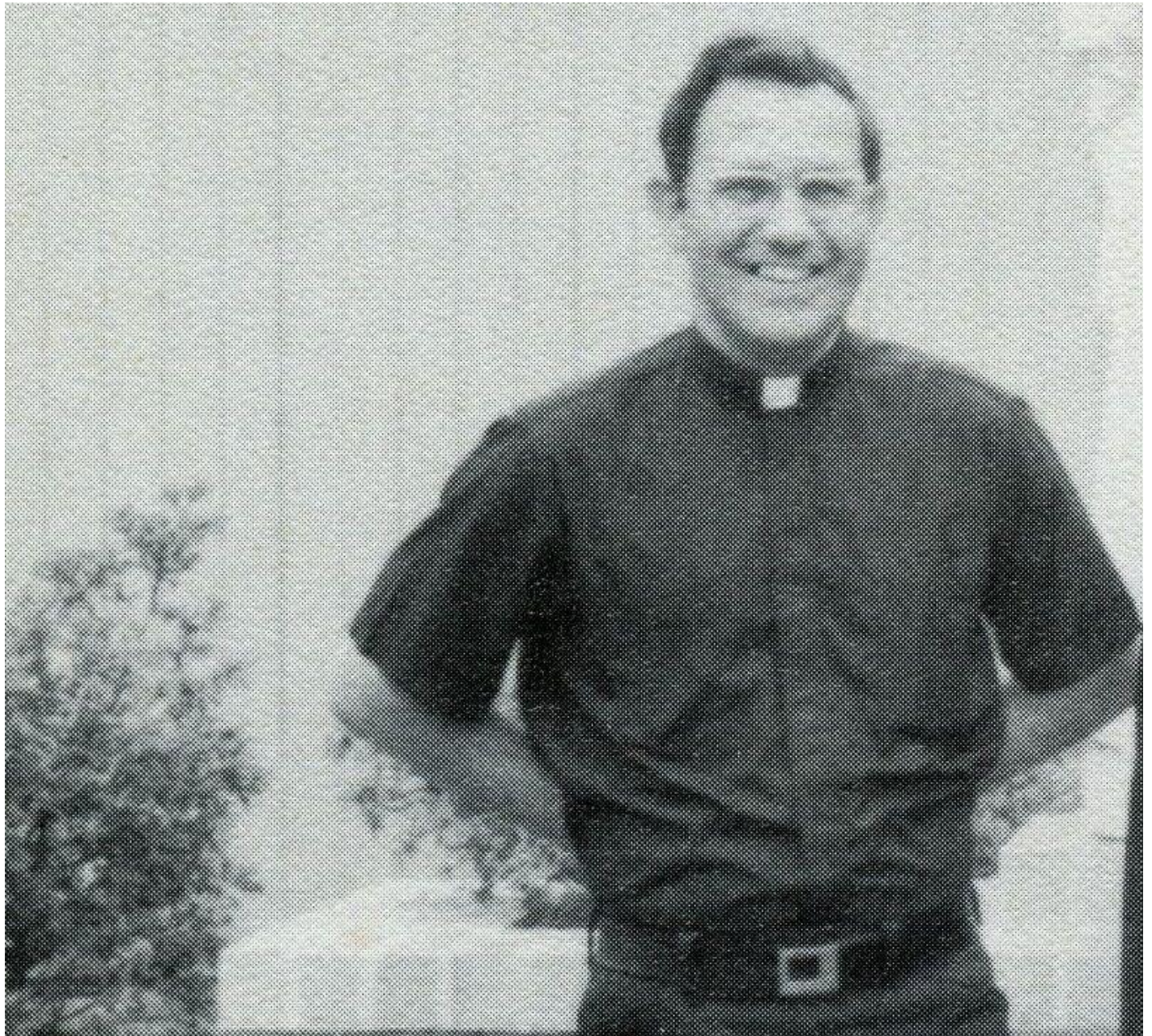
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Latest figure in New Orleans clergy abuse scandal worked with Girl Scouts

He also worked in four Catholic parishes from 1968 to 2001

BY RAMON ANTONIO VARGAS | Staff writer and DAVID HAMMER | WWL-TV

DEC 3, 2020 - 5:55 PM



Joseph deWater photo (via WWL-TV)

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For much of the 1970s, the Rev. Joseph M. deWater was known as the Archdiocese of New Orleans' spiritual director for Girl Scouts from Roman Catholic families, their parents and their leaders. His name ended up on the side of a gymnasium at the New Orleans East parish where he spent 15 years as pastor beginning in the mid-1980s, before he retired, moved to a small village in the Netherlands and faded into relative obscurity.

But now deWater's name has resurfaced locally. The archdiocese on Wednesday disclosed that he is facing possible church punishment following an accusation that he had molested a minor. Archdiocesan officials said they had shared the allegations with law enforcement.

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Archbishop Gregory Aymond said he has also suspended deWater, 85, from performing any clerical duties, pending the conclusion of the penal process, whose potential duration wasn't immediately clear.

Attempts to contact deWater for comment haven't been successful.

The archdiocese's announcement on deWater didn't contain any information about the nature of the alleged molestation or provide details on where the clergyman had worked in New Orleans before his retirement. The archdiocese

typically withholds such details until investigations into abuse claims deem them credible.

However, newspaper archives and church records suggest deWater at one time maintained a relatively high-profile presence in promoting participation with the local Girl Scouts scene. He was also either pastor or assistant pastor of at least four parishes in the New Orleans area, including a lengthy stint at the since-closed Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in the Pines Village section of New Orleans East.

While deWater's exact ordination date wasn't available Thursday, he was working as a priest in New Orleans by 1968, serving at St. Henry's in Uptown and St. Frances Cabrini in Gentilly from then until 1971.

He was the spiritual director for the Catholic Committee on Girl Scouting from 1972 to 1977, frequently hosting meetings with scouts, their parents and counselors at Notre Dame Seminary. In general, the role involved promoting participation in Girl Scouts to parishioners and their daughters.

DeWater was then listed as pastor of Our Lady of Prompt Succor in Chalmette for at least five years before leading the congregation at Immaculate Heart of Mary from 1986 to 2001.

The leadership there dedicated the church's gymnasium in honor of deWater in 2003, after a renovation. A parishioner paid for a plaque containing deWater's name to be placed on the side of the building, according to a Times-Picayune article.

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Immaculate Heart of Mary closed in 2008, three years after Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters laid waste to the area, and was demolished. Its

congregation was absorbed by St. Maria Goretti.

DeWater is now retired and lives in Voorhout, the Netherlands, according to the 2019 Official Catholic Directory, a national clergy registry.

Neither deWater nor a second retired priest similarly suspended Wednesday, the Rev. J. Luis Fernandez, have been added to the archdiocese's list of priests and deacons who have been credibly accused of child molestation. But depending on the outcome of the processes pending against them, they may be.

Aymond first released the roster in November 2018 with 57 names on it in a bid to come completely clean about the ongoing clerical abuse scandal. That list has since grown to 73 names, with the latest addition — the late Rev. Robert Cooper — coming Wednesday.

A local man named Tim Trahan publicly accused both Cooper and Fernandez of molesting him when he was a student in the mid-1970s at St. John Vianney Prep, which has since closed.

Kevin Bourgeois of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests said Thursday that the developments surrounding deWater, Fernandez and Cooper show that the public still doesn't know how many predatory clergy have worked in New Orleans. Bourgeois, the leader of SNAP's chapter in the city, renewed his oft-made plea for a law enforcement agency or a prosecutor's office to search the archdiocese's personnel files, identify all offenders and pursue any living ones.

“Here we are, two years later, and we're still counting new names,” Bourgeois said. “And why?”

Archdiocesan officials on Thursday declined additional comment on deWater. They encouraged anyone with information about abuse allegations to contact law enforcement, while also inviting victims to contact the archdiocese at (504) 861-6253.

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