

SOCIETY OF ST. PETER DAMIAN

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Why Did St. Thomas More High School Hire Former Seminarian with a History of “Safe Environment” Violations?

St. Thomas More High School is referred to as “the flagship school of the Diocese,” but in the past twelve years, four school employees have been arrested for sexual involvement with minors. In these situations, the Diocese of Lafayette has regularly suggested that through the use of their “Safe Environment” program, due diligence was exercised in screening applicants; but not only did “Safe Environment” prevent neither the employment of these individuals nor their abusive actions, but in the most recent case, it appears that the Catholic school actively ignored red flags when screening Jacob De La Paz, a former seminarian. Failing to take preventative action and allowing violators of “Safe Environment” policies to continue in their positions regardless of their behavior, is a repeated offense in the Diocese of Lafayette, and the effectiveness of the Diocese in protecting children is called into question once again through STM.

Jacob Conrad De La Paz, April 2023

St. Joseph Seminary College – St. Benedict, LA

Jacob De La Paz was born in 1990, graduated from Cabot High School in Arkansas, and was accepted in 2008 as a seminarian to study for the Diocese of Little Rock (<https://www.arkansas-catholic.org/news/article/1415/Number-of-international-seminarians-for-diocese-increases>). He attended St. Joseph Seminary College (St. Ben’s) north of Covington, Louisiana, and was sponsored by St. Boniface Church in New Dixie, AR.

Cabot High School – Cabot, Arkansas

After leaving seminary, De La Paz finished college, and at age 24, began teaching at Cabot High, where he engaged in “inappropriate communication/grooming with a female student via text messaging that included, but not limited to, messages talking about their future relationship together, and asking the student to lie about their relationship if asked in order for them to ‘protect each other,’ and that they had to be ‘very good actors.’” (Page 2) (<https://sspdlafayette.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/de-la-paz-arkansas-state-board-of-education-findings.pdf>).

In 2017, complaints against De La Paz prompted an investigation by the Professional Licensure Standards Board Ethics Subcommittee for the Arkansas State Board of Education. He was forcibly removed from the Cabot School District in May 2017.

North Vermilion High School – Maurice, Louisiana

By August 2017, De La Paz had moved from Arkansas to south Louisiana, and though he informed the Vermilion Parish school authorities of the investigation into his behavior, he was still hired to teach math at North Vermilion High School in Maurice.

On December 1, 2017, the Arkansas Ethics Subcommittee concluded their investigation with the recommendation that there be a permanent revocation (https://www.theadvocate.com/acadiana/news/crime_police/stm-teacher-facing-charges-after-suggestive-video-surfaces-jacob-de-la-paz/article_9b459560-e612-11ed-ab89-8ba1a79a8e71.html) of De La Paz’s teaching license. De La Paz appealed this decision on January 9, 2018, and continued teaching at North Vermilion. On October 23, 2018, the Hearing Subcommittee countered the previous recommendation with a 5 year suspension of license and a \$500 fine. De La Paz again appealed this decision, and on July 11, 2019, the Board imposed a mere 3 year probation of license and required him to “provide documentation from employing principal at educator’s school twice a year that educator has had no new violations.”

The Vermilion Parish Superintendent Tommy Byler has stated (<https://www.katc.com/news/around-acadiana/breaking-investigation-underway-in-complaint-against-educator>),

“In conversations with the Arkansas Board of Education, we were told that a hearing would be held but that in the meantime his license and his eligibility for employment until the time of his Board of Education hearing had no restrictions. He was eligible for employment in Arkansas at the time...Upon completion of his Arkansas hearing, in which no disqualifying or criminal charges were found, he applied for and received his Louisiana Department of Education certificate in September of 2019 upon approval and clearance from the Arkansas and Louisiana Departments of Education.”

Curiously, the lawyer who represented De La Paz during the [hearing for his appeal \(https://sspdlafayette.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/de-la-paz-arkansas-state-board-of-education-appearance.pdf\)](https://sspdlafayette.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/de-la-paz-arkansas-state-board-of-education-appearance.pdf) before the Arkansas Board was Mr. Joseph Giglio, an attorney from Lafayette, LA, with numerous familial connections to STM.

St. Thomas More Catholic High School – Lafayette, LA

De La Paz continued in his position at North Vermilion High School until June of 2022, at which point his three year Arkansas probation period was coming to a close, and was hired to teach math and coach track and field at St. Thomas More High School where his uncle-in-law was already employed. This uncle had attended college in Arkansas with another current teacher at STM who is married into the Giglio family.

De La Paz taught at STM for one year until authorities were alerted to a video spreading around social media wherein a shirtless De La Paz requested pornographic video from a 17 year old girl who he had taught at North Vermilion and who he had continued tutoring afterwards. On April 27, 2022, he was arrested. STM referred media inquiries to the Diocese of Lafayette which did not respond, but a letter to parents from the school’s chancellor, [Fr. Michael Russo, states that \(https://kpel965.com/explicit-video-lafayette-stm-teacher-vermilion-parish/\)](https://kpel965.com/explicit-video-lafayette-stm-teacher-vermilion-parish/),

“Whenever a teacher is hired at STM, due diligence is done by the school to check the person’s background and qualifications. De La Paz came highly recommended by his former employer after an extended period of exemplary service, had passed a background check in Vermillion Parish and passed our own. He was also safe environment trained. STM was made aware, up-front by Mr. De La Paz, of an isolated and imprudent infraction in his past. Having passed a probation period and performing well (and without further incident) in his previous teaching position, Mr. De La Paz was offered a position at STM and, again, proved to be exceedingly effective as both a teacher and a coach.”

During the investigation by Homeland Security, it was discovered that De La Paz [had sent another video \(https://1079ishot.com/jacob-de-la-paz-video-minor-child-porn-louisiana-arkansas-arrest/\)](https://1079ishot.com/jacob-de-la-paz-video-minor-child-porn-louisiana-arkansas-arrest/) to the same girl of himself masturbating. On May 17, a federal grand jury indicted him for one count of attempted production of child pornography.

Daniel Raborn, January 2019

On January 10, 2019, the Diocese of Lafayette released the following statement (<https://www.klfy.com/local/arrest-made-in-misconduct-investigation-involving-st-thomas-more-high-school-student/>) concerning 27 year old Daniel Raborn who turned himself into police on Monday, January 14, 2019, after a warrant for his arrest had been issued:

“St. Thomas More High School and the Diocese of Lafayette are aware of allegations involving an inappropriate relationship between a male St. Thomas More off-campus, extracurricular moderator and a female student...All entities in the Diocese of Lafayette are committed to upholding protocols stated in the “Safe Environment” program, which includes all Catholic school employees undergoing fingerprinting and criminal background checks.”

Raborn was charged (<https://www.theadvertiser.com/story/news/2019/01/11/diocese-investigating-alleged-relationship-between-stm-moderator-student/2547548002/>) with one count of prohibited sexual conduct between an educator and a student.

Joshua Krieg, January 2015

Joshua Krieg, also 27, had taught (https://www.theadvocate.com/acadiana/news/crime_police/lafayette-police-say-teacher-admitted-sexual-contact-with-student/article_41b26a87-08e4-5fa8-ba48-6c2004a647fc.html) English at St. Martinville Senior High School from March to May 2012, and at Comeaux High School from Aug. 12, 2013, until his resignation effective on Jan. 7, 2015. He resigned for “a personal matter (<https://www.theadvertiser.com/story/news/2015/01/22/stm-teacher-arrested-for-sex-with-student/22160949/>),” and was then hired by STM shortly thereafter to replace a teacher on maternity leave. He had been at STM for only one week when he was arrested on January 21, 2015. He admitted to being in love with a fourteen year old girl and having had sex with her on three occasions at his home. The girl told her mother who reported it to the police. Krieg pleaded guilty of carnal knowledge of a juvenile.

Msgr. Richard Greene, at the time spokesman for Bishop Jarrell, stated in an email to KATC (<https://973thedawg.com/st-thomas-morecomeaux-high-teacher-joshua-krieg-booked-for-felony-carnal-knowledge-of-a-juvenile/>) on behalf of STM,

“St. Thomas More Catholic High School is aware that on Wednesday, January 21, 2015, the Lafayette City Police arrested Mr. Joshua Krieg for questioning involving misconduct with a juvenile. The arrest of Mr. Krieg is not connected in any way to his employment at STM. Mr. Krieg was hired only seven days ago as a temporary teacher replacing a teacher on maternity leave. Appropriate background checks were conducted. Mr. Krieg has been placed on administrative leave pending the conclusion of the investigation. We are, of course, cooperating with the law enforcement investigation. We have no further information at this time.”

Eric Michael Manuel, December 2011

Eric Manuel (https://www.bishop-accountability.org/news2012/01_02/2012_01_27_Persac_FederalGrand.htm) was raised in Catholic schools, and like Jacob De La Paz, attended seminary at St. Joseph’s in Covington (https://www.theadvocate.com/acadiana/news/ex-youth-minister-sentenced/article_56e35be8-c4d5-5778-a301-e1d1cb7af8f7.html). Subsequently, he was a Eucharistic minister and a teacher of Confirmation classes. His mother taught at STM, and he took a position there as a youth minister while in college. On December 27, 2011, a mother in Kaplan reported Manuel to authorities after having found explicit cellphone messages between Manuel and her 15 year old son. This prompted an investigation which revealed that Manuel had been having sex with boys, soliciting sexual images from them and even threatening some who refused his advances. Manuel had more than 100 sexual images on his phone and more than 150 teen boys friended on Facebook. He had been using the alias (<https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdla/pr/former-youth-minister-sentenced-27-years-prison-enticing-minors-engage-sexual-conduct>) of Emily Brandt, posing as a 14 year old girl in order to solicit sexual images from teenage boys.

On March 29, 2013, he was sentenced to 27 years in federal prison plus 15 years of supervision after release. The judge took into consideration that he had used his position at STM and the psychological power he had over youth to prey on children.

Fr. Jodie Simoneaux

Fr. Jodie Simoneaux (<https://www.katc.com/news/around-acadiana/iberia-parish/2018/11/01/another-priest-placed-on-leave-after-allegations/>) was removed from public ministry by the Diocese in 2018 following reports that he had sexually abused minors decades prior. Previous in his career, he had taught sophomore religion at STM.

Fr. Gilbert Dutel

Fr. Gilbert Dutel was on the STM Board of Directors during his tenure as Pastor of St. Edmond’s Church in Lafayette. He has been accused of sexual abuse which has been outlined [HERE \(https://sspdlafayette.wordpress.com/2019/04/17/the-dutel-question/\)](https://sspdlafayette.wordpress.com/2019/04/17/the-dutel-question/). Though he is now retired, he still participates in events around the Diocese and the questions surrounding his accusations have never been adequately answered by Church officials or the media.

The Ineffectiveness of “Safe Environment”

The Diocese of Lafayette regularly appeals to its “Safe Environment” program as though it is a substantial protection against abuse.

-In response to De La Paz’s arrest, Fr. Russo assured people that he was “Safe Environment” trained and that a background check had been run, though his past “imprudent infraction” and the initial recommendation that his license be revoked was apparently not concerning to the Catholic school.

-In response to Daniel Raborn, the Diocese recommitted itself to its “Safe Environment” program and the use of background checks, and yet this did not prevent the hiring of an abuser.

-In response to Joshua Krieg, “appropriate background checks were conducted,” and then seven days later, he was arrested for having sex with a teenage girl.

Concerning the worst of the STM abusers, Eric Michael Manuel, like De La Paz, had been a seminarian. Presumably he had been trained many times in “Safe Environment” protocols, and yet even after seminary and years of working within the Church, the program failed to stop him or identify a potential problem.

The ineffectiveness of “Safe Environment” is not limited to St. Thomas More School, however. Violations of the program have regularly gone unaddressed across the Diocese. [Fr. Mikel Polson \(https://sspdlafayette.wordpress.com/2019/08/19/unredacted-eyewitness-accounts-of-an-unsafe-environment/\)](https://sspdlafayette.wordpress.com/2019/08/19/unredacted-eyewitness-accounts-of-an-unsafe-environment/), pastor of St. Michael’s in Crowley, was himself reported to the Diocese as early as 2014 for

violations of Safe Environment, for which Bishop Deshotel claimed “corrections” (<https://sspdlafayette.wordpress.com/2019/09/03/he-should-not-be-alone-with-children-says-bishop-deshotel/>) had been made by Bishop Michael Jarrell, though the nature of these corrections were not specified and the effect of which remains dubious. He remains in regular contact with children to this day.

The abuse committed by Fr. Michael Guidry in 2015 was preceded by violations of “Safe Environment” that the program’s own coordinator in St. Peter Parish failed to report. Furthermore, Fr. Guidry revealed his abusive actions to several priest of the Diocese of Lafayette, including Fr. Harold Trahan and Fr. Buddy Breaux (<https://sspdlafayette.wordpress.com/2021/05/27/did-our-priests-cover-up-child-sex-abuse/>), and they either stayed silent about the abuse, or their reports went unheeded by the Diocese, both possibilities being violations of “Safe Environment.”

Questions

- 1) What exactly did Fr. Russo and STM know about Jacob De La Paz prior to his being hired? If, as Fr. Russo’s statement says, “due diligence is done...to check the person’s background,” did this include examination of the court documents concerning the “imprudent infraction” committed by De La Paz along with the original recommendation that his license be permanently revoked?
- 2) If “Safe Environment” would forbid the kind of conduct that led to Mr. De La Paz’s Arkansas investigation, why was he hired at STM regardless of the final recommendation? Does the Diocese not have a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to sexual misconduct?
- 3) When did STM first see the video of De La Paz requesting child porn, and how much time elapsed before his dismissal from the school?
- 4) Regardless of a “probationary period,” what father would welcome as a tutor of his children, a man who had entertained a relationship with a high school girl? What does it say about a school that would take this chance with the children in its charge? If the administration would have consulted parents on such a hire, what would the parents have suggested? If the administration of a school takes this kind of chance with children, should they be trusted?
- 5) Why is it that a lay person is immediately removed after an “inappropriate infraction,” but priests who have had numerous reports against them are excused and allowed to remain in ministry, or moved around to a new parish, and allowed to retire within the institution? Does this suggest a particularly special treatment of clergy over laity? Did the fact that De La Paz and Manuel were once seminarians influence the hiring decision of STM?
- 6) If a Diocesan school will hire a teacher even though they knew he had acted in a manner contrary to “Safe Environment” guidelines, then is it any surprise that the Diocese would let a priest remain a pastor in spite of reported accusations of violation of that same program?

7) Bishop Deshotel was confident in Fr. Polson because he had received “corrections” from Bishop Jarrell. STM was confident in De La Paz because he too had been corrected; and yet De La Paz was arrested for acting out again. Why are we to believe that a priest will not act out again just because he was “corrected”?

8) How is it that St. Thomas More Catholic High School has hired so many abusers over the past few years in spite of “Safe Environment” screening? If this program neither identifies nor prevents abusers from acting, and if Diocesan authorities ignore violations, then how can it be considered an effective measure?

9) Considering all of the above, is it reasonable to conclude that whenever the Diocese appeals to “Safe Environment” as evidence of their being proactive against abuse, they are in fact being dishonest and self serving, and that the safety of children within parochial systems continue to be at risk to sexual predators?

Pro ovibus contra lupos,

The Society of St. Peter Damian



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One thought on “Why Did St. Thomas More High School Hire Former Seminarian with a History of “Safe Environment” Violations?”

1. **junethibmecom** says:

MAY 31, 2023 AT 7:02 PM

Has any of these priests been prosecuted? Looks like to me news outlets are scared of Bishop Deshotel

REPLY