

EXCLUSIVE: New lawsuit alleges sexual abuse by longtime Georgia priest



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By Christian Boone

A former altar boy has filed a civil lawsuit against the Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta alleging the church covered up sexual abuse by a deceased priest who served at 16 parishes, including several in Georgia.

The unidentified man said he was repeatedly molested by Father Douglas Edwards, who died in 1997. He alleges the abuse started when he was 12 and continued for three years in the late 1970s while Edwards was serving as pastor at Saint Joseph's Catholic Church in Dalton.

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Edwards was [one of 15 priests, deacons and seminarians](#) “credibly accused” of sexual abuse of a minor, Atlanta Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory disclosed last month. The list was released “in a spirit of transparency and the hope of continued healing for the survivors of abuse,” Gregory wrote.

That would indicate that Edwards victimized multiple boys, since their client only came forward recently, said attorneys Darren Penn and Paul Mones.

“They only included priests who were either deceased, convicted or removed from the priesthood,” said Mones, who, in 2010, won a groundbreaking case against the Boy Scouts of America which forced the release of the organization’s “perversion files” detailing 20 years of sexual abuse of scouts by adult leaders.

The list was “a day late and a dollar short,” Mones said.

Paula Gwynn Grant, a spokeswoman for the archdiocese and Gregory, said church officials had not seen the lawsuit and could not comment on it.

“We reiterate that we in the Archdiocese of Atlanta abhor every instance of abuse,” Gwynn Grant said. “Now, as in the past, we care deeply about the survivors, who deserve emotional, physical and spiritual healing, and we offer our pastoral resources and staff to assist them.”

Once small, the Catholic population in Atlanta, and more broadly in Georgia, has climbed in recent years fueled by an influx of immigrants and transplants from more Catholic parts of the country. There are currently about 1.2 million Catholics in the Archdiocese of Atlanta, which stretches into North Georgia.

Still it has, so far, managed to escape the sex abuse scandals that have gripped archdioceses in Boston, Pennsylvania and, most recently, Illinois.

Robert Hoatson, a former Catholic priest who now heads the New Jersey-based national sexual abuse advocacy group Road to Recovery, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution in November that the list seemed incomplete.

"My goodness, there have to be many more for an archdiocese the size of Atlanta and from 1956 to now," Hoatson said. "I'm confounded, frankly. To me, this list is much too short."



Atlanta Archbishop Wilton Gregory in 2015 file image. BOB ANDRES / BANDRES@AJC.COM (Richard Halicks/Bill Rankin's Legal Brief)

In the lawsuit filed Thursday in Cobb County Superior Court, the onetime altar boy alleges Edwards sexually assaulted him between 8 and 10 times, committing oral sodomy and fondling the plaintiff's penis. Much of the abuse took place at Edwards' home on Lake Allatoona, where he often took groups of boys from Saint Joseph's, according to the complaint.

“As a result of the sexual abuse, Plaintiff has throughout his life suffered from a variety of emotional and psychological problems including but not limited to embarrassment, shame, anger and depression,” the suit states. “Plaintiff also experienced a loss of faith and spirituality which were bedrocks of his life prior to the abuse.”

The defendants, including Saint Joseph's, knew about the allegations and “actively concealed the identities of sexual predators and allowed them to remain in unsuspecting communities, exposed to innocent children, for decades.”

Edwards joined the priesthood in 1961, serving at parishes in Atlanta, Kennesaw, Rome and Milledgeville. He took two leaves of absence during his 28-year career for reasons unspecified by the Atlanta Archdiocese.



The Archdiocese of Atlanta has been accused in a lawsuit of covering up sexual abuse by a longtime priest.

“He’s not in one place for more than six years,” Penn said. “It fits a familiar pattern in the Catholic Church of transferring problematic priests around the country rather than reporting them to authorities.”

Mones said he expects additional victims to come forward once word spreads of the suit against Edwards.

“(The church) may think they have taken responsibility by publishing that list, but they did so way too late,” he said.

Penn noted that the archdiocese [led opposition to the Hidden Predator Act, legislation proposed in the Georgia General Assembly that would have extended the statute of limitations for victims from age 23 to 38](#) and created other avenues for adults to sue long after that age. It passed unanimously on the floor of the House of Representatives last winter but was defeated in the Senate following an intense lobbying effort by the church, the Boy Scouts and other entities facing greater risk of financial liability.

Gregory said the bill was "extraordinarily unfair" to the church and would “hinder its mission by allowing lawsuits for actions that occurred years ago.”