

Archbishop Responds to Father Drew Being Placed on Leave

By Jessica Rinaudo

During the weekend of July 27-28 it was announced at Masses that Father Geoff Drew, pastor of St. Ignatius Parish in Cincinnati, is on administrative leave. No further details were provided, which left many feeling frustrated. On Monday, July 29, parishioners attended a meeting at St. Ignatius where archdiocesan officials revealed that Father Drew had allegedly engaged in behavior that violates the Decree on Child Protection – although no allegations of sexual abuse or criminal activity had been reported at that time.

The gravity of this incident was underscored by the revelation just over a week later that this was not the first time that Father Drew's behavior had been reported to the archdiocese. Two separate reports were written in 2013 and 2015 about the priest's behavior while he served as pastor at St. Maximilian Kolbe Parish in Liberty Township. The reports from those time periods included allegations that Father Drew gave uninvited hugs, shoulder massages, leg pats above the knee and made inappropriate sexual comments about their bodies and appearances to teenage boys. In both instances, the concerns reported to the central office were promptly forwarded to the Butler County Prosecutor's Office and Butler County Children's Services.

Despite these allegations, Father Drew remained in active priestly ministry and was eligible to apply for parishes with open listings. In 2018, St. Ignatius Parish was in need of a new pastor, and Father Drew applied for the position. His assignment was made upon recommendation of the Priest Personnel Board, but at that time, the Board and Archbishop Dennis M. Schnurr were unaware of the priest's alleged past transgressions. Those reports were held by Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Binzer, who upon receiving the information, spoke with

Father Drew on two occasions and received assurances that the behavior would cease.

A month after Father Drew's appointment to St. Ignatius, however, Archbishop Schnurr received a letter expressing concern about Father Drew's behavior. The letter reiterated points made in 2013 and 2015 in the reports sent to Bishop Binzer. It was through this most recent letter that Archbishop Schnurr learned that there were previous allegations against Father Drew. Father Steve Angi, archdiocesan chancellor, promptly gave the letter to the Butler County Prosecutor's Office for investigation.

Following the recommendation of the Butler County Prosecutor, Father Drew was told to restrict his involvement with St. Ignatius School during the investigation, and he was assigned a "monitor" with whom he would have regular accountability meetings. No one informed the school principal of this restriction, and, ultimately, this approach proved inadequate, as Father Drew continued his contact with the school.

"Our acceptance of this recommendation, combined with inadequate oversight, was obviously ineffective and a mistake, and we will not repeat it," said Mike Schafer, archdiocesan Director of Communications and Mission Promotion.

Despite investigation results that showed no criminal activity, Archbishop Schnurr did not feel they were adequate to exonerate Father Drew.

"In the past, if investigators found that there was no criminal activity, the issue was dropped. In light of what I saw being reported relative

to McCarrick last year, I knew this action was not enough," said Archbishop Schnurr. "The *Decree on Child Protection* has more boundaries than the behavior simply being non-criminal. We have to also investigate boundaries."

After receiving all the information uncovered by the civil investigation, the archdiocese began its own investigation into the breach of boundaries with Strategic HR, a company hired by the legal firm that represents the archdiocese.

In May 2019, Father Angi received the investigation report from Strategic HR. The investigation found no criminal behavior but recommended that the archdiocese provide Father

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Drew with professional and targeted counseling, which he began in June 2019. During this time, archdiocesan offices received another complaint from a family who said Father Drew had text-messaged their teenage son. The archdiocese reported this accusation to Hamilton County Prosecutors, who confirmed that, although the texting took place, no criminal behavior had occurred.

Given the pattern of behavior in contradiction to the *Decree on Child Protection*, Archbishop Schnurr removed Father Drew as pastor of St. Ignatius on July 23, placing him on a leave of absence and ordering him to undergo comprehensive physical, psychological and spiritual evaluation at an independent, in-patient treatment facility outside of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati.

This series of events has left the

people of the archdiocese feeling confused and worried for the future. *The Catholic Telegraph* sat down with Archbishop Schnurr on Aug. 6 to learn more about how policies and procedures have changed in light of recent events; the future of Father Drew and what St. Ignatius Parish can expect in regards to new leadership.

New and Updated Policies

To combat incidents like this, the archdiocese has adapted, clarified and instituted a multitude of policies in the central offices, parishes and schools.

Archbishop Schnurr said in the past, protocols for reporting clergy abuse were different from those used to report abuse by lay people. The Director of Priest Personnel managed any reports about clergy, while the Department of Human Resources (HR) handled incidents involving lay people. Now, HR, in conjunction with the Safe Environment Office, will manage all reports of abuse by both laypeople and clergy.

This change has multiple benefits. One, there will be multiple sets of eyes and ears on all reports of abuse. Second, the departmental directors will meet weekly with the archbishop to keep him abreast of all important information, including any investigations into abuse. HR will bring all accusations against clergy to the archbishop's immediate attention, and all directors will follow up in their weekly meetings.

Additionally, said Archbishop Schnurr, "If there is an allegation with a semblance of truth that comes in against a priest, we will follow the same procedure we have with lay people. The priest will be put on leave, the investigation will take place and we will report it immediately to civil authorities. They will conduct their own outside investigation."

The archdiocese has also issued

a mandatory reporting protocol to all central office employees stating: “All employees and clerics of the Central Offices of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati who receive any information (anonymous or otherwise) regarding a potential violation of the *Decree on Child Protection* by a cleric (priest, deacon, etc.) are required to immediately report such information in writing to Father Steve Angi, chancellor, or Joseph Riede, Safe Environment Coordinator. This mandatory reporting requirement applies regardless of your position/role in the Central Offices, the manner in which the information is received (verbal, written, etc.) or the level of detail provided in the report of such information.”

Board and Committee Changes

Archbishop Schnurr explained that the Priest Personnel Board is composed of five priests, nominated by their peers, who represent five different age groups of the clergy within the archdiocese. The members of this Board oversee priest assignments, including priest retirements, clergy transfers and priests’ appointments to parishes.

Because Bishop Binzer withheld information about Father Drew, the archdiocese removed him from his capacity as Director of Priest Personnel and from his position on the Priest Personnel Board. Additionally, Bishop Binzer served on the Child and Youth Protection Committee for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and has since resigned.

Father David Endres will now fulfill the role of Director of Priest Personnel and be an ex-officio member of the Priest Personnel Board. Additionally, two lay people from the archdiocesan offices will take part in priest personnel meetings. These two lay people will communicate any reports of allegations against clergy to the priest personnel Board members so they will have all information prior to making priest assignments.

What Will Happen to Father Drew?

On Aug. 19, the Archdiocese of

Cincinnati learned that a Hamilton County Grand Jury returned a nine-count indictment against Father Drew stemming from alleged crimes during his time at St. Jude Parish, where he served as music director 1984-1999.

At the time of this interview, Archbishop Schnurr planned to send Father Drew to an independent in-patient facility located in another state that would evaluate him psychologically, spiritually and physically. The findings would be considered, along with other factors, by the archbishop when making decisions about Father Drew’s future. However, that plan changed as the archdiocese cooperated with local authorities and kept Father Drew in Cincinnati where he was eventually arrested.

What Will Happen with Leadership at St. Ignatius?

Following Father Drew’s removal, the archdiocese named Deacon Tim Helmick as temporary administrator of St. Ignatius Parish. Father Dave Kobak, OFM, will continue as parochial vicar and minister to the pastoral needs of the parish.

Archbishop Schnurr acknowledged that St. Ignatius is large parish and cannot go without a pastor for an extended period of time.

“The process for assigning a new pastor to St. Ignatius will follow the standard procedure through the Priest Personnel Board; however, I will ask Father Endres to gather the Board together and expedite this appointment. My hope is to have someone in place in a month, two months at the latest,” said Archbishop Schnurr.

In his closing words, Archbishop Schnurr acknowledged the pain this incident has brought to the Catholic faithful of the archdiocese.

“I acknowledge that in the handling of Father Geoff Drew, serious mistakes were made,” said Archbishop Schnurr. “I apologize for the pain or sorrow that we inflicted on our parishioners as a result. We are determined to make the necessary changes in procedures and personnel so that these mistakes will not be repeated.”

EVENT TIMELINE

- In **2013** and **2015**, the central office of the archdiocese received concerns from St. Maximilian Kolbe parishioners regarding Father Drew’s behavior. The alleged behavior towards teenage boys, while not illegal, violated the archdiocesan *Decree on Child Protection*.
- The concerns reported to the central office were forwarded to the Butler County Prosecutor’s Office and Butler County Children’s Services. The investigation by the Prosecutor’s Office found no evidence of criminal behavior.
- Bishop Binzer, in his role as Director of Priest Personnel, addressed Father Drew’s behavior with him on two separate occasions prior to 2018. Father Drew said he would change his behavior.
- The central offices of the archdiocese received no complaints about Father Drew from **October 2015** until **August 2018**.
- St. Ignatius Parish became what is known as “open listed.” That is, the Priest Personnel Board advertised the open position to the priests of the archdiocese and invited indications of interest. Father Drew indicated to the Board that he would like to be considered. He was not asked to leave St. Maximilian Kolbe Parish.
- In **August 2018**, the month after Father Drew was assigned as pastor of St. Ignatius of Loyola Parish, the central office received a complaint via letter from a St. Maximilian Kolbe parishioner essentially reiterating the 2015 and earlier concerns. This letter was turned over to the Butler County Prosecutor’s Office for investigation.
- In **September 2018**, at the recommendation of the Butler County Prosecutor, Father Drew was asked to restrict his involvement with the school during the investigation and was assigned a “monitor” for accountability.
- In **October 2018**, Bishop Binzer received a letter from a St. Ignatius parishioner describing her son-in-law’s very negative reaction to Father Drew dating back to his experiences with then-Mr. Geoff Drew at Elder High School. This letter was promptly forwarded to the Butler County Prosecutor to inform their investigation which was in progress.
- Father Angi received the Butler County Prosecutor’s investigation report in early **February 2019**. The Prosecutor’s Office again found no evidence of criminal behavior.
- Because the allegations involved possible violations of the *Decree on Child Protection*, Fr. Angi commissioned Strategic HR to investigate. This investigation began in February 2019. Fr. Drew was asked to continue to restrict his involvement with the school during this investigation.
- In **May 2019**, Fr. Angi received the investigation report from Strategic HR. The investigation uncovered no criminal behavior, but recommended that Father Drew be provided professional counseling. Father Drew began attending counseling sessions with a psychologist in **June 2019**.
- In **June 2019**, a complaint was received by the central office from a St. Ignatius family alleging that Father Drew had texted their teenage son. This complaint was immediately turned over to the Hamilton County Prosecutor’s Office. Their investigation confirmed the texting, but revealed no criminal behavior on the part of Father Drew.
- Given the pattern of behavior in contradiction to the *Decree on Child Protection*, Archbishop Schnurr removed Father Drew as pastor of St. Ignatius on **July 23, 2019**, placing him on a leave of absence.
- On **July 31, 2019**, Deacon Tim Helmick was named Temporary Administrator of St. Ignatius parish.
- On **Aug. 19, 2019**, the archdiocese learned that a Hamilton County Grand Jury returned a nine-count indictment against Father Drew. He was arrested by local authorities.