



Bishop Jeffrey J. Walsh of Gaylord, Mich., is pictured in an undated photo. In response to the Michigan Attorney General's Office release Jan. 8, 2024, of a report on its investigation of abuse claims in the Gaylord Diocese over several decades, Walsh offered an apology to victim-survivors and pledged the diocese would remain vigilant in its efforts to maintain a safe environment and provide assistance and healing. The report on Gaylord was the second of seven expected reports related to clergy sexual abuse in Michigan's seven dioceses. (OSV News photo/courtesy Diocese of Scranton)

Detroit Catholic

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GAYLORD, Mich. — January 11, 2024

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The Michigan Attorney General's Office Jan. 8 released its second of seven expected reports related to clergy sexual abuse in Michigan's seven dioceses and outlined its findings related to abuse allegations in the Diocese of Gaylord.

Since 1950, the report identified, allegations of sexual misconduct have been made against 26 priests and two deacons in the Diocese of Gaylord; of those, 18 were ordained or incardinated by the Gaylord Diocese, which was established in 1971.

The report details both substantiated and unsubstantiated allegations of abuse, including cases in which Michigan's statute of limitations or the death of the priest in question have precluded charges.

It also includes allegations in which the alleged conduct "did not violate Michigan law or the person who alleged the sexual abuse did not wish to pursue criminal charges," the Attorney General's Office said in a statement.

"It is important to note, a criminal charge is merely an allegation, and a defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty," the statement said.

The Attorney General's Office praised the Diocese of Gaylord's cooperation in the investigation, adding the diocese's help "was instrumental in the compilation of the report" and that the final report was first shared with the Diocese of Gaylord "to ensure accuracy and completeness."

To date, the investigation by the Attorney General's Office into Michigan's seven dioceses has resulted in charges against 11 priests or former priests, of which nine cases resulted in convictions. None of those cases was related to priests ministering in the Diocese of Gaylord.

According to the report, approximately 85% of the alleged incidents of sexual abuse against minors and adults occurred before 2000, with the largest number of allegations related to incidents in the 1970s.

Of cases related to alleged abuse of minors, there have only been two such allegations since 2000, both alleging inappropriate conduct by a "priest who is no longer in ministry," according to the Diocese of Gaylord.

Of the 28 clergy listed in the report, 16 are "known or presumed to be deceased," and of the remaining 12, "there is no priest or deacon in active public ministry in the diocese who has a substantiated allegation of abuse or misconduct involving a minor," Gaylord Bishop Jeffrey J. Walsh said in a video message to the faithful of the diocese.

Walsh noted the report does contain allegations against three priests who are currently ministering in the diocese, and that those allegations "involve reported sexual conduct with adults." The Attorney General's Office has not filed criminal charges against any of these priests and none of them has a substantiated

allegation of abuse of a minor, the report said.

"While none of these allegations resulted in criminal charges, nevertheless I plan to meet with the diocesan review board this month to discuss the particulars of the report and determine any further actions," Walsh said.

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The attorney general's report on allegations in the Gaylord Diocese is the second related to its statewide investigation of Michigan's seven dioceses, which began in October 2018. The first report, on the Diocese of Marquette, was released in October 2022. All of Michigan's dioceses have cooperated in the investigation.

The Attorney General's Office plans to release individual reports on each of the remaining five dioceses, including the Archdiocese of Detroit, at a later date.

One of the priests named in the Gaylord report, Fr. Gerald Shirilla, was ordained for the Archdiocese of Detroit and suspended from public ministry in 1993. In 2001, without the approval or permission of the archdiocese, Shirilla accepted assignment as a pastor in the Diocese of Gaylord. Within a few months, he was removed from that post. He died in 2004.

Responding to the report from the Attorney General's Office, Walsh offered an apology to victim-survivors and pledged the diocese would remain vigilant in its efforts to maintain a safe environment and provide assistance and healing.

"As your bishop, first let me begin by expressing deep sorrow and shame, especially to the victims and their families. The painful reality of sexual abuse by members of the clergy, including by bishops, priests and deacons all around the world, has roiled the Catholic Church for several decades now," Walsh said in the video message.

"Sexual abuse causes deep wounds that often leave lasting physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual effects on victims," Walsh added. "While listening to people's accounts over the years, I have seen the immense pain these sins have caused victims and their loved ones. Their stories break my heart."

While noting the decrease in allegations over the years and the church's efforts to implement protocols and norms for reporting abuse and fostering safe

environments, such as the establishment of the U.S. bishops' "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" in 2002, Walsh said the report is another reminder of the "very human side of the church, which is not immune from the brokenness that we find in humanity," and the need to learn from the past.

"I humbly offer an apology to each victim survivor who has been violated by anyone affiliated with the Catholic Church. Many of you suffered in darkness for years, and I am truly sorry for that," Walsh said. "I know shedding light on this will bring comfort for some, but reopen wounds for others that will be painful, and for that my prayers are with all victim-survivors."

The Archdiocese of Detroit said it "remains committed to fully cooperating with state officials as they continue their investigation." For more information about the handling of abuse cases in the Archdiocese of Detroit and how it approaches safety for children, youth and vulnerable adults, referred people aod.org/charter.

The archdiocese urged individuals with knowledge of sexual abuse by clergy or other church representatives to contact local law enforcement and/or the Michigan Attorney General's Office at (844) 324-3374 or aginvestigations@michigan.gov.

It also said individuals may contact the Archdiocese of Detroit by visiting protect.aod.org calling the toll-free, 24/7 victim assistance line at (866) 343-8055 or by emailing vac@aod.org. There are no time limits or restrictions on individuals wishing to report abuse.