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Archbishop Gregory Aymond conducts a procession to lead a live streamed Easter Mass in St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans, Sunday, April 12, 2020. In April 2024, Louisiana State Police carried out a sweeping search warrant at the Archdiocese of New Orleans, seeking a long-secreted cache of church records and communications between local church leaders and the Vatican about the church's handling of clergy sexual abuse. (AP/Gerald Herbert, File)

by Associated Press

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New Orleans â?? December 4, 2024

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A disgraced 93-year-old New Orleans priest pleaded guilty Tuesday to charges involving the sexual assault of a teenage boy in 1975.

Lawrence Hecker, who left the ministry in 2002, had been scheduled to stand trial Tuesday. Hecker's eyes were focused on the ground as a sheriff's deputy pushed him toward Orleans Parish Criminal District Court Judge Nandi Campbell's courtroom, The Times-Picayune/The New Orleans Advocate reported.

Hecker entered his plea to aggravated kidnapping, aggravated crime against nature, first-degree rape and theft before Campbell, moments before jury selection was scheduled to begin, multiple news outlets reported. Sentencing was set for Dec. 18. He faces life in prison.

The trial had been delayed for months over concerns about Hecker's mental competency and because District Judge Ben Willard recused himself from the case, citing a conflict with prosecutors. The case was reassigned to Campbell, who ordered Hecker to undergo routine physical and psychological evaluations before the trial.

A doctor confirmed that Hecker has Alzheimer's disease and dementia, but Hecker was found competent to stand trial, according to his attorney Bobby Hjortsberg, [WDSU-TV reported](#).

[A grand jury indicted Hecker last year](#) following an investigation that revealed he had confessed to molesting multiple juveniles over his decades of service with the Archdiocese of New Orleans. But, the charges brought against him stem from a single alleged incident that happened between 1975 and 1976, prosecutors have said.

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The indictment comes amid a years-old legal battle over a trove of secret church records that were shielded by a sweeping confidentiality order after the archdiocese sought [Chapter 11 bankruptcy](#) protection in 2020 following a flood of abuse claims. The records are said to chronicle years of such claims, interviews with accused clergy and a pattern of church leaders transferring problem priests without reporting their crimes to law enforcement.

The alleged survivor in the criminal case against Hecker is among those who have filed abuse claims against the archdiocese in its long-running bankruptcy case. To date, more than 600 alleged abuse survivors have filed claims against the archdiocese.

“It is our hope and prayer that today’s court proceedings bring healing and peace to the survivor and all survivors of sexual abuse,” the Archdiocese of New Orleans said in a statement. “We continue to hold all survivors in prayer.”