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Prison release of former priests raises questions for Catholic church

1 hour ago • By Lilly Fowler

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Morning sunlight bathes the Cathedral Basilica early Thursday, Jan. 24, 2013, in St. Louis. Photo by Erik M. Lunsford elunsford@post-dispatch.com

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One of the first St. Louis area priests to plead guilty to sexual abuse since the crisis shook the Roman Catholic Church more than a decade ago is now a free man.

On Monday morning, after 12 years in prison, Gary P. Wolken, 49, walked out of the Western Missouri Correctional Center in the small town of Cameron.

That has some in the community worried.

Advocates for victims of sexual abuse say the Archdiocese of St. Louis could and should do more to protect the public from priests who have admitted to sexually abusing children, even after they are no longer allowed to function as pastors or have served time in prison.

“We believe it’s disingenuous and dangerous for bishops to recruit, educate, ordain, hire, train, supervise, transfer and shield predator priests, but then defrock them when their crimes hit the headlines and do nothing else to protect the vulnerable from them,” said David Clohessy of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

The question of what the church should do in such instances is one that leaders will likely continue to confront as other abusive former priests complete prison sentences. According to the nonprofit group Bishop Accountability, between 275 and 300 Catholic clerics have served prison terms in the United States.

At the heart of the debate are what obligations, if any, the church has in the name of those it has already disavowed and — in the case of Wolken — paid out settlements to address their misdeeds.

A statement from the St. Louis Archdiocese on Monday emphasized those severed ties.

Wolken is “no longer a priest of the Archdiocese of St. Louis and will live as a private citizen, subject to all sex offender regulations upon his release.”

“We continue to pray for the victims and families of the grave evil of sexual abuse,” the statement read.

“The Archdiocese of St. Louis encourages anyone with reports

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of misconduct with a minor involving a member of the clergy or other church personnel to contact Deacon Phil Hengen, Director of Child and Youth Protection, at 314-792-7704, the Missouri Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline at 1-800-392-3738, or law enforcement officials.”

In 2002, Wolken admitted that from 1997 to 2000, he sexually abused a Ballwin boy he helped care for as a baby sitter.

The archdiocese suspended him from his duties as associate pastor at Our Lady of Sorrows in south St. Louis.

In 2003, Wolken was sentenced to 15 years in prison. While in prison, Wolken was removed from the priesthood. A civil suit cost the Archdiocese of St. Louis almost \$1.7 million, the largest amount known to have been paid to one victim.

In 2006, in a letter opposing early release, furlough or parole, St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney Robert McCulloch called Wolken a dangerous individual.

Advocates for victims of sexual abuse say because of the severity of the crimes, the archdiocese has an obligation to do more than post a statement on its website when a former priest such as Wolken has been released from prison.

“You can have stuff sitting online, but if nobody is reading it, it’s not very helpful. You have to be proactive,” said Boz Tchividjian, executive director of GRACE, an organization

that works with faith communities to help prevent and respond to sexual abuse.

Pat Wall, a victims’ advocate with the Minnesota law firm Jeff Anderson & Associates, called on St. Louis Archbishop Robert Carlson to take every available step to protect the public.

“I think he has the moral responsibility. I’m not saying he has the legal responsibility to keep that guy away from his target population and to protect the public good,” Wall said.

The archdiocese could, advocates say, communicate better with parishes, personally visiting each one to warn them when men such as Wolken have been released. The archdiocese could also use church bulletins to urge other victims to come forward.

“He’s paid for one set of sins for one individual,” Clohessy said, but priests such as Wolken are likely to have sexually abused more than just one individual.

“It’s not about inflicting suffering on the guilty, it’s about avoiding suffering for the innocent.”

And there’s the fact that men such as Wolken may very well still consider themselves Catholic. Wolken and others may not only attempt to get a job but join a church as well.

“He’s still a Catholic, so an ongoing problem we have is he going to be in parishes attending Mass?” said Jennifer Haselberger, a canon lawyer in St. Paul, Minn. Parishes “have an obligation to set some real limits with him.”

Haselberger said some churches might bar former priests such as Wolken from attending services altogether, while others might insist on escorting him in and out of a parish. Still others might restrict the Masses he can attend, ensuring those with many families remain off limits.

“He does still have the right to get the sacraments,” Haselberger said.

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