

Ad removed. [Details](#)

DAVID HAMMER

Archdiocese of New Orleans pushed confidential settlements with victims of monstrous deacon George Brignac

Lawyers representing the church or its insurers took a hard line, arguing that plaintiffs had waited too long, and that they would be lucky to get anything.

Losing Faith: A David Hammer investigation

Author: David Hammer / Eyewitness Investigator, Ramon Antonio Vargas / The New Orleans Advocate
Published: 10:58 AM CST December 18, 2020
Updated: 10:25 PM CST December 18, 2020



NEW ORLEANS — The email to the Archdiocese of New Orleans came in on a Friday in November 2018.



SPONSORED by The New Yorker

Go Beyond the Headlines

Save 50% and get 12 weeks of The New Yorker, plus a limited edition tote. Subscribe now.

[See More](#)

A week earlier, New Orleans Archbishop Gregory Aymond had published a list of clergymen credibly accused of child molestation -- a first-ever effort by the leadership in this traditionally Catholic city to fully come clean about the depth of a scandal that blew up in 2002 and had begun to simmer again in the summer of 2018.

Ultra slo-mo camera records light bouncing!



FEATURED BY 

The scandal's recent flareup owed mostly to the first name on the list, which was organized alphabetically: George Brignac. That name jumped out at one man, and it prompted him to write the email.

Brignac had been arrested three times in the 1970s and 80s on molestation charges, before the archdiocese permanently suspended him from his duties as a deacon. But despite his extensive rap sheet and his removal from the clergy, Brignac had gone on to spend another 20 years volunteering with a Catholic community service organization, and -- with the blessing of two different pastors -- he had been reading at Masses at St. Mary Magdalen in Metairie. Both roles brought the former Catholic school teacher into proximity with children and gave him an imprimatur of trust, despite his own written admission, for his own good, and theirs, he should not be allowed to work around minors.

That arrangement had largely escaped public notice until the summer of 2018. That's when a local man announced in a newspaper story that he had received \$550,000 from the archdiocese after he explained he was raped as a child by Brignac decades earlier.

Aymond has said he was unaware subordinates of his at the local parish level had brought Brignac back into a low-profile role, and his hope was the release of the list of abusive priests would prevent something like that from recurring. But the list -- along with news of the \$550,000 settlement -- brought on a torrent of fresh claims, including the one from the man who emailed the archdiocese on Nov. 9, 2018.

He was among more than a dozen other men who came forward with similar stories about Brignac. His ensuing experience, detailed in thousands of prosecutors' files released after Brignac's death earlier this year, offers a glimpse into how acrimonious the negotiations can get, even as church officials say their primary goal is to help victims heal.

this day in history

this day in history

Ads By **Connatix**

The man, who has never publicly identified himself, wrote that he was in sixth grade in 1978 at Our Lady of the Rosary's school when Brignac first "groomed and methodically" molested him, groping his genitals, abuse that went on for two years. He said he first came forward in 2003, after the exposure of covered-up clerical abuse cases in Boston shocked the nation. But, the high-ranking priest who spoke with him -- Monsignor Ray Hebert -- dropped the inquiry after Brignac denied "strongly that he has ever sexually abused or molested a child."

Brignac "believes that the church has been unfair to him by denying him the right to be a deacon or a teacher," Hebert wrote the man. "He is hurting."

Now, 15 years later, the victim spoke with a different church official. This one was more sympathetic. "I do believe you and want to help you resolve this," said Stephen Synan, a religious brother and the archdiocese's victims assistance coordinator.

Synan's proposed solution: a \$55,000 payment to help the man "move forward."

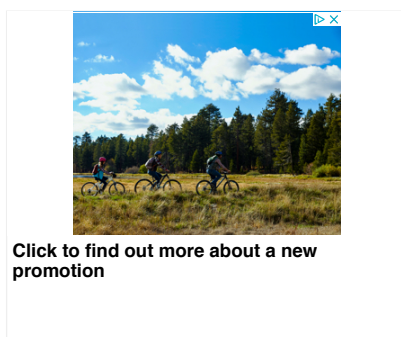
The victim -- who wanted at least \$350,000 for his lifelong anger and depression -- wasn't having it. "To say I am disappointed in the offer is an understatement," said the man, who turned to a civil attorney.

The archdiocese's general counsel at the time, Wendy Vitter, quickly warned him that if he overplayed his hand, he could come away with nothing.

In a Dec. 21, 2018, email to the man's attorney, Steven Babcock, Vitter said Louisiana law is clear that the claimant had one year from when he was last abused to begin pursuing damages. Legally, it doesn't matter if he was a minor, Vitter said.

The plaintiff said the one-year period shouldn't apply because it wasn't until 2018 that Brignac was unmasked as a molester. But Vitter, who last year was confirmed as a federal judge by the U.S. Senate, warned that was going to be a tough argument to win. Its weakness, she added, was compounded by the victim's decision to come forward once earlier, in 2003.

The fact that the church brushed him off back then was of no consequence, from Vitter's perspective.



"The Archdiocese submits ... a court will dismiss (the victim's) lawsuit as untimely," Vitter wrote. "Nothing that the Archdiocese has said or done has revived his untimely claims."

But, Vitter added, the victim's "anger towards the church is evident." She said, "We try to care for people. That is part of our ministry." So she extended a non-negotiable, \$100,000 settlement offer "out of pastoral care and concern."

She had one more condition.

“The amount of the settlement will be confidential,” her email said. “That must be part of any agreement.”

Transparency provisions that U.S. bishops adopted after 2002 state plainly that dioceses “are not to enter into settlements which bind the parties to confidentiality unless the victim/survivor requests confidentiality.” In a statement this week, the archdiocese argued that “the decision to request confidentiality on the dollar amounts of settlements does not violate” those provisions.

Vitter didn’t respond to a message seeking comment.

Babcock’s client ultimately accepted the offer of \$100,000. Vitter replied that the archdiocese would work to “get this done very quickly” and sincerely hoped the victim “finds some peace in the future.”

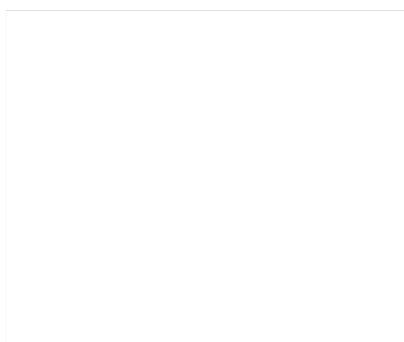
Emotional Wreckage

Such negotiations played out between the archdiocese and at least 17 men who settled claims against Brignac with the church between April 2013 and May 2019.

All but two of those agreements came toward the end of that period, as word of the \$550,000 settlement made in early 2018 spread like wildfire. That agreement was the largest one, with the rest ranging from \$25,000 to \$495,000. One claim dating back to 2002 and settled in 2013 was worth \$88,500.

In total, the settlements cost just over \$3 million.

The victims were children from four different decades, born from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s. Several said they were abused by Brignac, a longtime teacher in local Catholic schools, before his 1976 ordination as a deacon but after his 1960 dismissal from the Christian Brothers religious order.” Many others said they were abused during Brignac’s 12-year run as a deacon.



They recalled suffering a wide range of abuse at his hands, from inappropriate touching and genital groping to violent anal rape. At least a couple of them had reported Brignac to authorities, who had arrested him three times, though none of those bookings led to a conviction. Most came forward only recently.

Taken together, those 17 cases began to provide a clearer picture of the scale of emotional wreckage Brignac wrought. But the list is by no means complete.

For example, one woman came forward during this time and reported that while she took a make-up math test as a sophomore in 1984 at the all-girls high school Cabrini, Brignac -- in his

first of four years there -- groped her breast while breathing heavily and licking his lips. It is not clear whether she pursued a settlement; so far she appears to be Brignac's only known female accuser.

Another alleged victim not included in this toll is a man who filed a highly publicized lawsuit against Brignac that turned up emails between archdiocesan officials and members of the New Orleans Saints football team's front office as the church sought to manage the fallout of the ongoing clerical molestation scandal.

That lawsuit, along with dozens of other similar ones alleging clergy abuse, was indefinitely put on hold after the archdiocese filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in May.

Prosecutors' files contain written exchanges between the archdiocese's lawyers and attorneys for at least some of the claimants who settled. Without fail, lawyers representing the church or its insurers took a hard line, arguing that plaintiffs had waited too long, and that they would be lucky to get anything.

One such memo argued that the man who ultimately received the largest settlement should have filed his claim within a year of the moment -- decades earlier -- that his mother spotted a hickey on his neck left by Brignac. The man and his attorney, Roger Stetter, countered that the victim had blocked memories of his assaults until his mother ran into Brignac in 2017, and that the one-year clock should start then.



That argument, the church's lawyers contended, was "irrelevant."

An archdiocesan spokesperson this week said positions taken by the church's attorneys don't reflect the beliefs of Aymond or other clerical leaders. The spokesperson said Aymond's willingness to release the list of clerical abusers and update it as new information comes forth shows he listens to victims.

The flood of victims who came forward in 2018 and 2019 weren't the only ones who took note of Brignac's story. New Orleans police and prosecutors did as well.

Charged again

The road to Brignac's fourth -- and final -- child molestation arrest started in August 2018, when the recipient of the \$550,000 settlement met with New Orleans police.

He recounted how from 1978 to 1982 -- when he was between the ages of 7 and 11, serving as an altar boy at Our Lady of the Rosary -- Brignac forced him to engage in oral sex, masturbated in front of him and eventually began raping him.

The victim -- now a National Guard veteran and medical professional -- bolstered his account with handwritten notes from Brignac reading, "I love you," "I'll miss you," and "can't wait to see you again."

Police decided they had heard and seen enough to prepare first-degree rape charges against Brignac. The charge has no statute of limitations.

The ensuing probe, conducted jointly by police and Orleans Parish District Attorney Leon Cannizzaro's office, was ambitious. Documents obtained through a public records request show the DA's investigators found at least one other man who reported being anally raped by Brignac.

That second man would be among the youngest of Brignac's victims, saying that he was 3 or 4 when the serial molester preyed on him between 1983 and 1984 at Our Lady of the Rosary. In his statement to police, the victim said his mother was a volunteer in the church cafeteria. Brignac would approach him in the hallways, tease him about having been naughty and then pull him into the back of the church.

There, the victim later told a detective, Brignac would say that he needed to clean the boy because the child had soiled himself. Brignac would then rape him, warning it would feel like "a big mosquito" biting him in the rear, the victim said.

At least one person told police Brignac was innocent: his twin, Horace, nicknamed H.L.

H.L., who died in April, confirmed his brother knew the former altar boy now accusing him of rape, and acknowledged George may have touched his genitals. But H.L. insisted his brother would've stopped short of rape: He said George didn't touch children "for immoral reasons because his brother was not looking for gratification," according to an investigator's notes.

Police decided otherwise, and they arrested George Brignac in September 2019. Three months later they indicted him on a charge of raping the altar boy. Cannizzaro said this week his prosecutors believed the altar boy's case was the strongest one they had.

Brignac, who bonded out of jail after being charged, would face mandatory life imprisonment if convicted.

Though he pleaded not guilty and retained veteran attorney Martin Regan to defend him, a reckoning seemed to be building. Records suggest prosecutors also planned to charge Brignac with the rape of the cafeteria volunteer's son. And they had identified at least 25 other men -- including the former cafeteria worker's son -- who were prepared to testify that they, too, had been victimized by the deacon, though either statutes of limitation or a prior acquittal barred additional charges.

They included a combination of people who had settled civil cases or were working to do so; victims at the center of Brignac's prior arrests; and other claimants who had not previously come forward. The testimony from such a phalanx of survivors would buttress the accounts given by the ex-altar boy.

The question was whether the ex-deacon, now 84 and enfeebled, would live long enough to hear it.

End of a monster

The chances for a trial in 2020 waned when the coronavirus pandemic shut down Criminal District Court starting in spring.

Brignac was in frail health, living at an Uptown nursing home while battling heart disease, high blood pressure, peripheral nerve damage and other medical conditions. He had also fallen and broken his back about the time he was charged.

As local spread of the coronavirus slowed in the summer, Criminal District Court Judge Karen Herman scheduled a preliminary hearing for July 9.

But on the morning of June 29, Brignac was short of breath. He went into cardiac arrest as paramedics rushed him to Touro Infirmary.

A doctor pronounced Brignac dead soon after his arrival, a coroner's office report said.

He was 85.

The former altar boy who triggered Brignac's final arrest said the news of his longtime tormentor's death set off conflicting emotions.

"I did want him to be acknowledged as a pedophile and the criminal and the monster that he was and that we know he was and many other people know he was," the man said recently.

But he dreaded the thought of testifying and the intense news coverage it would likely generate. And, a part of him felt relief.

"I wouldn't have to get up in front of a jury and relive all the horrible experiences that I've had to relive multiple times," the man said.

Now, perhaps, he mused, he was ready to begin the process of moving on with the rest of his life.

But it wouldn't be easy.

"Nothing can change what I went through," he said.

In his will, Brignac wrote that he wanted six former students to serve as his pallbearers. He left some of them money. Others got things like a Rosary, a luxury watch, a nice pen and fancy cufflinks.

Teaching children, he said, was his life's greatest privilege.

"The children who have come under my care for the 32 years I taught school have been my family and my joy," Brignac wrote. "My only regret is that I was not a better role model to them and that most of them never really understood how much I loved them and wanted to share myself with them.

"I hope they have learned to love God and His Blessed Mother and that I haven't caused them too much disappointment or harm."

Related Articles

[Losing Faith: The Church Sex Abuse Scandal](#)

[Losing Faith: Despite predatory past, deacon welcomed back to Catholic institutions](#)

[Losing Faith: A monster emerges in our midst](#)

► *Get breaking news from your neighborhood delivered directly to you by downloading the new FREE WWL-TV News app now in the [IOS App Store](#) or [Google Play](#).*