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Should Chicago priest return to ministry after revelations of teen misconduct?



The Rev. Bruce Wellems, here outside his church in 2011, has a long record of serving youths and families in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood, but sexual misconduct as a teenager could cost him his clerical collar. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

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Should a priest's sexual misconduct as a youth bar him from ministry? That's the question facing Chicago Archbishop Blase Cupich.

For decades, the Rev. Bruce Wellems, a Roman Catholic priest with the Claretian Missionaries, has served as a father figure for young men in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood.

But when revelations of his sexual misconduct as a teenager resurfaced in 2014 shortly after his religious order transferred him to California, Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez removed him from ministry immediately. He returned to his former neighborhood to resume work as a youth advocate and community organizer.

Now Cupich must decide whether the popular priest can wear a collar, celebrate Mass and officially return to active ministry. Wellems, 58, admits to the abuse, though his recollection of the details and how long it lasted differs from the victim's.

"These allegations had nothing to do with who I was as a person," Wellems said in an interview with the Tribune. "In my adult life I've done nothing against children. There's nothing that's ever come up."

The contrast between the actions in Los Angeles and Chicago highlights a gray area in the church's policies on clerical sexual abuse of children and a stark difference in how two archdioceses have handled the issue. Rules adopted by America's Catholic bishops in 2002 apply to priests and deacons who commit even a single incident of abuse, but they give dioceses considerable discretion on how to apply the church's zero-tolerance policy.

The case of Wellems also raises the question of whether one's adolescent behavior should stand in the way of his vocation, especially when that person has played such a vital role caring for families in one of Chicago's poorest, most gang-infested neighborhoods.

But the nature of his vocation is precisely what bothers his victim, Eric Johnson, now a 50-year-old father of three living in Colorado. He first contacted the Chicago Archdiocese in 1995 when he learned that Wellems worked with kids.

"I just worry that I've seen him as I've always seen him — in the ultimate position of being able to take advantage of these poor kids who struggle at every point in their life," he said.

Life of service

Over the past 30 years, Wellems has become a champion for young Latinos. Several years after his ordination in 1986, the Claretians moved him to Holy Cross Immaculate Heart of Mary parish in Back of the Yards, where he worked with at-risk youths in the neighborhood.

When Chicago Public Schools adopted a "one strike, you're out" policy — expelling students for offenses such as weapon possession, drug use and gang affiliation — Wellem's helped establish two alternative schools, which since have become two campuses of the Peace and Education Coalition Accelerated High School.



Rev. Bruce Wellem's leads a Posada procession with members of his congregation on Dec. 21, 2015.

(Brian Jackson / Chicago Tribune)

He also developed support groups, counseling for families, a children's pantry and after-school parish programs including a children's choir, a marimba ensemble and a ballet troupe through the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council.

"I got a reputation for working with youth only because we were setting up opportunities for them," he said. "I've always felt when a kid pulls a trigger, he's saying 'I give up.'"

Wellems is especially known for his partnership with Boys Town, a juvenile rehabilitation center founded in Nebraska as an orphanage nearly a century ago. Starting in 2000, Wellems directed young men and women, often with gang ties, to the residential treatment facility in Omaha.

In 2006, he and a coalition of schools, churches, businesses and law enforcement secured city funding to build a site closer to home and state money to cover the first year of operating expenses.

Politicians learned they could rely on him to point them to problems and solutions, said Susy Schultz, who met Wellems in the late 1990s on the Hispanic affairs beat for the Chicago Sun-Times. He had the ears of former Mayor [Richard M. Daley](#), U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin and onetime Chicago Public Schools CEO Paul Vallas, just to name a few.

In 2007, the [Illinois House](#) of Representatives passed a resolution congratulating Wellems for "his hard work and dedication to the people of his neighborhood."

But three times in the past 20 years, Wellems has had to defend his integrity with church officials.

Accusation

Johnson, Wellems' victim, was 5 years old when his mother threw his father out of the house in Albuquerque, N.M., and they divorced. The Wellems family lived three doors down.

"The divorce and situation was one that was very turbulent," Johnson said. "Basically I was one of those kids who didn't really have a father figure at the time. ... I have an older brother and sister, but the Wellems family was a larger family. They were the do-good people."

Johnson's mother worked multiple jobs to make ends meet. By the time he was 7 in early 1973, he would wander down the street to play basketball with Greg Wellems, who was a year older than him. After Greg would go inside, Bruce would stay and play basketball with Johnson, placing bets on baskets and putting him up to dares.

"He really started taking me under his wing," Johnson recalled.

But soon, Johnson said, Wellems' affection evolved and lost wagers turned into demands for sexual favors. Over the course of a year, Wellems secreted Johnson into his bedroom and the loft above the garage where he would abuse him, Johnson said.



The Rev. Bruce Wellems, 58.

(Brian Jackson / Chicago Tribune)

"He would sneak me into the house through the front door to his room, which was very difficult for him to do with four or five other siblings, and he would basically undress to have me do things to him," Johnson said. "No one ever taught me what I should have been taught at that age."

But by the time he was a teenager, Johnson realized what had happened was "disgusting." Feeling a mixture of guilt and shame, he acted out, picking fights at his Catholic high school. In his early 20s, he finally sought therapy and told his parents.

In 1995, his mother saw an article about Wellems' ministry in Back of the Yards. Appalled that Wellems was working with young people, Johnson wrote to the archdiocese to make officials there aware of the priest's history.

The allegation was referred to the Claretians, who confronted the priest. Wellems confirmed that Johnson was telling the truth. He went through clinical assessments and entered counseling before the Claretians cleared him to return.

"We found no reason why he shouldn't continue in ministry," said the Rev. Rosendo Urrabazo, now provincial superior of the Claretian Missionaries in the U.S. "His work speaks for itself without any complaints."

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin accepted the determination in July 1996 and restored Wellems' faculties to wear a collar and serve as a priest, the archdiocese said.

"They said we take this very seriously," Johnson said of the archdiocese. "We do all this psychological testing and look into it. ... He will never be alone with any children."

Ten years later, Johnson came across Wellems' name again in Chicago Parent magazine. He contacted Schultz, the former Sun-Times reporter who by then had become the magazine's editor and Wellems' friend.

She said she and others couldn't find any allegations of abuse by Wellems as an adult. Still, she confronted Wellems, who admitted to his inappropriate conduct as a teenager. But during that uneasy conversation, Schultz said she could tell that Wellems was ashamed by what he had done and had devoted his life to making up for it.

"How can you make a mistake that causes so much pain to one person, live with it and go on?" Schultz said through tears. "He found a way to do it."

The fact that no other complaints exist now doesn't matter, Johnson said. It can take years for a child who has been sexually abused to come forward, he said.

"It took me 18 years to tell my own mother," he said. "Somebody is not going to raise their hands (as soon as it happens). That's not how it works. You go through years and years of shame and anger and you feel like you've done something wrong. ... It's for years haunted my life."

Admission

Wellems said what he did when he was 15 has haunted him since he was a college student at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash. That's when he learned that a relative had been sexually abused.

He recalled what he had done years earlier. At the time, he said, he was simply repeating what an older kid had done to him during a Boy Scout camping trip.

"The behavior I exhibited as a teenager was taught behavior," he said. "We lived in a culture of silence in our neighborhood. We had a big Scout troop — boys were boys kind of thing. We didn't talk to our parents about anything."

Distraught over the abuse of the family member and his own behavior, he said he went to a confessor, a Jesuit priest, who laughed him out of the confessional and told him to grow up.

"That's how it was treated back then in the '70s," he said.

Life as a missionary appealed to him, so he joined the Claretian Order. He attended Catholic Theological Union in Chicago to prepare for ordination and helped found a leadership program for young Latinos.

Never during his preparation to become a priest did he mention his misconduct to superiors. Nor did they ask. According to letters exchanged with Johnson in 1995, his report was the first they learned of it.

"I felt great shame 20 years ago when he ... wrote to my provincial about it," Wellems said.

After that inquiry, Wellems confided in his peers. He already had confided in his spiritual director, Sister Irene Dugan, a member of the Cenacle Catholic community of religious women at [Loyola University](#)'s Institute for Pastoral Studies.

"She taught me to use my experience as motivation to serve people," he said.

Maia Christopher, executive director of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, said that is often the right approach. Minors often don't sexually offend again, as opposed to adult sex offenders, for whom recidivism rates are greater, she said. But that's hard for people to grasp. People who can forgive others for mistakes they made in their youth often draw the line at sexual abuse, she said.

"There is a very moral aspect to sexual behavior and there is an egregiousness to it that shapes people to look at sexual offenders very differently than people who have offended in other kinds of ways," she said.

"You don't define kids by the worst thing they've ever done and hold them to that standard for the rest of their life," Christopher said. "If somebody is contributing to the community, we can put things in place that allow them to contribute to the community that does everything possible to ensure their safety, that can capitalize on that success and ensure that people aren't at risk of getting hurt."

Peg Duros, clinical director for Chicago's Center for Contextual Change, counsels victims of sexual abuse and perpetrators. She said determining whether people like Wellems should serve in a position often depends on whether they completed a reputable sex offender treatment program.

"The truth is now, in this day and age, that is a reportable offense, especially because of the vast age difference," Duros said. "However, knowing that he was also a survivor is significant. In our professional realm, what we would call that is 'sexually reactive behavior.' He was perpetrating on someone else probably something similar to something done to him. That doesn't take away from the seriousness of it. It certainly doesn't take away from the impact it may have had on his victim."

Allegations resurface

In 2012, the Claretians transferred Wellems to San Gabriel Mission in Los Angeles and promoted him to prefect of the apostolate for the Claretian Missionaries, a position in the Claretian hierarchy.

"Everyone is subject to being transferred. They know they're not here to stay," Urrabazo said. "We all try to be not just doers of good work but also teachers for others."

Because Wellems served as a parish priest and belonged to a religious order, the Claretians submitted a "letter of suitability," further endorsed by the Chicago Archdiocese, officials for the Los Angeles Archdiocese said. Neither institution mentioned the 1995 complaint, church officials said.

But in May 2014, the Los Angeles Archdiocese received a tip that there was something in Wellems' past. Given its zero-tolerance policy, church officials circled back to Chicago and made an inquiry.

"Our issue in the (Los Angeles) archdiocese is quite simply that we have adopted a very strong zero-tolerance policy, which basically says anyone whether they are clergy, volunteers or employees — who's ever been found to be involved with misconduct involving a minor — cannot be in those roles," an official said.

"His conduct did not occur while he was a cleric," the official continued. "(The Chicago Archdiocese) didn't have an obligation to tell us about this conduct. It's our zero-tolerance policy, not their failure to tell us the whole thing."

In June, Wellems was asked to resign from San Gabriel Mission. He returned to Holy Cross in Chicago. The Chicago Archdiocese restored his faculties in March.

A church official in Chicago said the law treats juvenile cases differently, and therefore so does the church.

Joelle Casteix, the author of "A Compassionate Response: How to Help and Empower the Adult Survivor of Child Sexual Abuse," has supported Johnson since Wellems was removed from the California parish. She said the church should be forthright with the facts of the case so parents can decide whether their children are safe.

"Eric wouldn't be sitting in Colorado saying, 'Why won't anyone listen to me?' if Cupich and the Claretians had done the right thing," she said. "Zero tolerance shouldn't be open for interpretation."

As Wellems awaited his next assignment, Casteix contacted the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. DCFS opened a case in May, prompting the archdiocese to once again revoke his permission to celebrate Mass or wear a clerical collar. State investigators spoke with colleagues, community members and Johnson.

In July, they documented the decades-old claim as evidence of risk — in case the department receives another allegation against Wellems as an adult.

"If we find out the priest is still around children, we take a risk report," said Veronica Resa, a DCFS spokeswoman. "We don't investigate the old incident but use it as information and support for the new risk." The complaint is erased after three years, she said.

The Claretians petitioned Cupich to restore Wellems' faculties immediately.

"He's dedicated much of his priestly ministry to working with young people, especially youth at risk in Back of the Yards," Urrabazo said. "He looked for every possible way to encourage young people to live lives of hope and lives of possibility."

So far, nothing has stood in Wellems' way of continuing to do that work.

"People have said the air of the neighborhood has held more hope since he's been back — just him being here," said Sister Angie Kolacinski, who has overseen youth programming at Holy Cross for the past 28 years. He models how to overcome mistakes made during

youth, she said. "That's why we have so many young people participating in our programs. They feel safe here."

Kolacinski said she has never spoken to the victim. But if she did she would listen.

"I didn't live his experience," she said. "I just know what our lived experience is. There is no fear here."

Being without a collar prevents Wellems from hearing confessions, celebrating Mass and presiding at funerals. He has been forced to turn down families in recent months, even though he has buried a number of children in Back of the Yards over the years.

It did not keep him from making a trip to Rome earlier this fall as one of two priests representing the religious order's U.S. province at a worldwide meeting. During an audience with Pope Francis, Wellems handed him a letter, asking him to push for prison reform.

"In my past, I have sinned," Wellems wrote. "It wasn't a crime. It was a sin," adding that his status as a priest is "in limbo."

Cupich has referred the question of Wellems' return to the archdiocese's Independent Review Board, a spokeswoman said.

"As much as I hate going through this, maybe it's good," Wellems said. "I'm obviously against abuse. My whole ministry has been spent protecting families and children."

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