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Retired Dutch priest, accused of abusing 2 New Orleans boys decades ago, denies wrongdoing

BY DAVID HAMMER | WWL-TV

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Joseph deWater at his home in the Netherlands

PHOTO COURTESY WWL-TV

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Faced with a formal church investigation into allegations that he sexually abused a New Orleans altar boy in the mid-1970s, the Rev. Father Joseph deWater denies wrongdoing and suggests his accuser should not “dwell on things when he was a young boy.”

DeWater, who capped a 35-year career in the New Orleans area as a pastor, coach and educator by having a Roman Catholic school gymnasium named for him in 2003, granted WWL television an extensive interview at his home in the village of Voorhout, Netherlands, about 35 minutes south of the Dutch capital of Amsterdam.

He decried the ability of one man, who deWater said is now 59, to make a complaint about something that allegedly happened more than 40 years ago and besmirched his good name.



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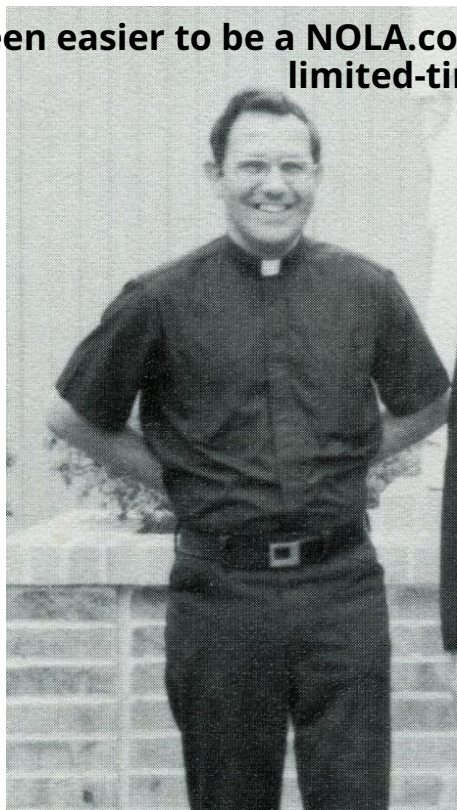
“I think I've been a good pastor over there,” deWater said after inviting in a Dutch TV crew hired by WWL. “God will judge me on that, but I certainly have tried to be.”

He continued, speaking with a thick Dutch accent and sometimes sprinkling in Dutch phrases, “And this makes me feel rotten. It's something now (after) so many years (for) this to come and to be played out on me and to dwell on the things when he was a young boy.”

DeWater said he received a letter from the archdiocese detailing the allegations against him, adding he had spoken to New Orleans Archbishop Gregory Aymond on the phone within the last two days.

He said Aymond asked him to write out his side of the story. But he said he gave his defense over the phone and has “the feeling (Aymond)

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The Rev. Joseph deWater, at left, during his tenure as a parish priest in New Orleans.

PHOTO COURTESY WWL-TV

believes me”

The archdiocese sent a statement denying that, saying, “Archbishop Aymond informed Father deWater of the investigation and did not express any opinion on the credibility of the claim.”

The archdiocese declined further

comment on the pending investigation, adding, “It is unfair and unjust that allegations are tried in the media before complete and thorough investigations can be concluded.”

Now 85 and living in an assisted living center near his birthplace of Leiden, deWater still had notes and documents about the archdiocese's investigation laid out on his living room table.

He used a magnifying glass to read the documents and remind himself about his accuser, a boy he knew half a lifetime ago.

“He was very shy ... to begin with,” he said.



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As one of the archdiocese's younger priests in the 1970s and 1980s, deWater was highly engaged with youth, leading the altar boys and coaching soccer. He was an assistant pastor at St. Frances Cabrini from 1971 to 1976 and at Our Lady of Prompt Succor from 1977 to 1985. He served as pastor at Immaculate Heart of Mary in New Orleans East from 1986 to 2001, and the gymnasium was dedicated in his name in 2003. The whole campus was flooded two years later in Hurricane Katrina and torn down.

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In the interview, deWater said his unnamed accuser described going “many, many times” with him to swim at an unknown location across Lake Pontchartrain. He said the accuser claimed they were naked together, but deWater said they changed into swimsuits separately.

“I was not about anything just to see his behind naked at all. I would not be interested in that,” he said.

He then said, starting in Dutch and then switching to English: “There was no sin, nothing in the swimming pool.”

He did acknowledge one allegation detailed in the letter from the archbishop: that he purchased two swimsuits for the boy that were “popular to wear.”

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“The two new swimsuits, that's the only thing that I agree with in this whole letter,” he said.

DeWater said he doubted that he could have gone across the lake with his accuser more than a few times because of his busy schedule with Mass and other duties.

But other former students at St. Frances Cabrini say deWater took them on retreats with several other boys to go camping, play sports and swim. One of those is Mark Lambour, a former St. Frances Cabrini altar boy who said deWater tried to molest him in the sacristy of the church in 1972, about three years before the incident now being investigated by the archdiocese.



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Lambour, 62, first filed allegations against deWater with the archdiocese in the summer of 2018. Lambour said news coverage of a string of accusations against other clergymen had brought suppressed memories about deWater to the fore. He suddenly couldn't stop thinking about an early morning in the church when he

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said deWater came up behind him, started whispering, "I love you," kissing him and reaching down his pants.

He, like the other accuser, was shy, Lambour said. He was also a diminutive eighth grader, he said. But he said he wriggled away, screamed at deWater and threatened to tell his father. He said the principal called him to her office later that day and deWater was there, saying he didn't want a "misunderstanding" about what had happened.

Lambour said he didn't tell his dad or his siblings what happened because he was afraid his father would try to kill the priest if he found out.

Lambour first spoke with WWL-TV in August 2018 and expressed frustration with the archdiocese's process for reporting clergy

abuse. This was more than two months before the local church tried to address the abuse crisis head-on by releasing a list of credibly accused clergy. Lambour said he tried unsuccessfully to reach someone at the church's abuse hotline.



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Lambour said he did speak to church officials, but was so angry he gave up on the process. But then, more than two years later, he heard about the formal investigation of deWater and decided to speak out about his experience.

He said he was relieved to find that another person made similar allegations. He said that showed a “pattern of behavior” and he’s glad to see the archdiocese pursuing an investigation.

He hopes that by speaking out, others whose lives had been upended by abuse would find new strength and maybe renewed faith — faith

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he said he lost after the encounter in the back of the church. "That crossed every line you can do to a human being ... with more or less a child in the sacristy. Of any place you could do this. This is not the river or a camp. You are inside the back of the church," Lambour said. "And you're going to pull this? No, sorry, dude. You're done. That's it."



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