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# State police investigate priest on leave from Trinity High after abuse allegation

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The Archdiocese of Louisville has confirmed that a Roman Catholic priest has been placed on leave from his Trinity High School teaching duties while state police investigate an allegation that he sexually abused a boy at a Meade County summer camp nearly 30 years ago.

Church officials say the Rev. R. Joseph Hemmerle has not performed public ministry or worked as a religion teacher and coach at Trinity since late January or early February, when police received the allegation. Archdiocesan officials say that he has denied the allegation and that there are no other accusations on record against him.

Hemmerle and his attorney, David Lambertus, have declined to comment

on the claim by Louisville native Michael Norris, 39, who is now a chemical engineer living in Houston.

Norris approached the archdiocese in September with his complaint that Hemmerle had molested him in the mid-1970s when Hemmerle was director of Camp Tall Trees, an archdiocesan summer camp for boys at Otter Creek Park in Meade County. Norris was about 11 at the time, he said.

Norris told the newspaper in an interview that he is not seeking money — just the assurance that the priest will get counseling and not work unsupervised with anyone under 18. He said he went to police four months later, only after the archdiocese did not give him that assurance.

“I have a moral obligation, I feel, to prevent this from happening again to another child,” said Norris, who grew up one of eight siblings in a Catholic family that has said it is supporting

him in the matter.

Brian Reynolds, chief administrative officer for the archdiocese, said that because of the active police investigation, he could not comment on specifics of the case — or how the archdiocese handled the allegations in the months before police became involved.

But in a prepared statement, Archbishop Thomas Kelly said Hemmerle “has a long record of distinguished service to this archdiocese. There is nothing in his record that suggests he could be guilty of this accusation.”

Kelly added: “I am keenly aware of Mr. Norris’ pain and anger, and I am sorry that he feels that he has been hurt by a priest of the archdiocese . . . The archdiocese has tried to reach out to him.”

Reynolds said the archdiocese fol-

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lowed all of its usual policies when it receives an allegation of sexual abuse by an employee. He and other archdiocesan officials had Hemmerle undergo a psychological evaluation, and they reviewed his work history and spoke with people who worked with him, Reynolds said.

Reynolds declined to reveal the results of the evaluation or to answer whether he believed the accusation. But when asked why Hemmerle remained on the job for four months after the accusation was received, he said: "We would never knowingly leave a priest in an assignment if we had any belief a child was at risk."

At a news conference yesterday, Kelly discussed a hypothetical situation that, while he did not use names, closely resembles Norris' allegation about Hemmerle.

Kelly used the illustration to show why he doesn't believe in a blanket "zero tolerance" policy that would banish all accused priests from the ministry, "especially when you're dealing with a case perhaps that we never knew anything about," he said.

"Let's take one of those, that has now come to light 30 years later. A priest who's led a life that is not only blameless but has gotten millions of encomiums of praise and thanks for the work he has done. Now 30 years later comes along one single allegation of sexual misconduct, child abuse or inappropriate behavior.

"What is to be done with the 30 years of good service that has occurred here?" Kelly asked. "Is it impossible for him ever to return to ministry? An allegation that long ago certainly requires psychological assessment; it requires that we would abide by whatever treatment is recommended. But is it impossible to utilize such a man in such a way that we are accountable to the people whom he might serve?"

### Norris' allegations

In a letter sent Sept. 19 to Hemmerle and copied to Kelly and Trinity High School Principal David Winkler, Norris alleged that he went to Hemmerle seeking medical attention for poison ivy and that the priest fondled him and made other sexual advances when he undressed.

In response to Norris' claim, the archdiocese wrote him on Sept. 25, saying Hemmerle would undergo a psychological evaluation. A letter dated Nov. 21 said that had been done, without providing the results.

Norris provided the newspaper with copies of the correspondence between him and the archdiocese, which has refused to comment.

In an interview, Norris said that he was unsatisfied with the church's response and arranged for a meeting with Kelly, which took place on Christmas Eve in Louisville.

Norris told the newspaper that at the meeting Kelly expressed concern for his welfare but told him he would continue to allow Hemmerle to teach at Trinity because the archbishop considered that assignment to be supervised by the principal.

Kelly reaffirmed that in a Jan. 14 letter to Norris, in which he also said that Hemmerle denied the allegations and that there had been no other reports of inappropriate behavior.

"I have directed that (Hemmerle) not be assigned to any position involving non-supervised contact with anyone under the age of 18," Kelly wrote to Norris. "We have decided to close Camp Tall Trees. (Hemmerle) will no longer direct a camp for the archdiocese. However, I have not re-



The Rev. R. Joseph Hemmerle was director of Camp Tall Trees in Meade County, where a man, then about 11 years old, says the abuse occurred.

stricted him from his teaching at Trinity High School, since this assignment is supervised under the direction of the principal of Trinity High School."

The archdiocese announced in February that it would close the camp because of its deteriorating condition and declining popularity as well as plans by the city of Louisville to remake Otter Creek Park, which the city owns. It told the newspaper yesterday that the closing of Camp Tall Trees was unrelated to the allegation against Hemmerle.

In a Jan. 23 letter to Kelly, Norris said he was not satisfied with the archbishop's response. In one part, Norris wrote:

"What bothers me the most about your response is that you seem to not believe my story. . . . By your actions, you have shown that you believe him and discount my story. As I'm sure that you are aware, we both can't be telling the truth. I allege that he sexually molested me and he denies it. You state this as if since he denied it, then the event must not have occurred.

"Let me remind you that the jails are full of people who deny they are guilty of what they were accused. I know in my heart that I am telling the truth."

Shortly after writing the letter, Norris said he called the Kentucky State Police post in Elizabethtown to report the alleged abuse.

Tommy Stiles, a Kentucky State Police detective at the Meade County post, said last week that he spoke with Norris, Hemmerle and archdiocesan officials. Stiles said Hemmerle told him he would only speak in the presence of his lawyer. Stiles said that the case remains open but that there is little police can do in an old case with one witness, he said.

Earlier, Stiles had told the newspaper that the case had been closed. In response to that information, passed along by the newspaper, Kelly said in a statement that "if the police have indeed dropped their investigation and found no evidence of wrongdoing, Joe (Hemmerle) will be returning to active ministry."

Reynolds, however, said that with the investigation continuing, he could not predict what the archdiocese would do. Even if the police did not bring charges, the archdiocese would first have to assess any information police did develop.

A search of court records in Jefferson and Meade counties by The Courier-Journal turned up no other complaints against Hemmerle. The office of Jefferson County Commonwealth's Attorney Dave Stengel said it is unaware of any allegations against Hemmerle.

Norris said he went public only because he was unsatisfied with the church's response.

"I want to get it in front of the public that you cannot trust the Catholic Church," he said.

He has not filed a lawsuit, he said, because he does not need the archdiocese's money and is also aware of legal restrictions on filing lawsuits over events that allegedly occurred many

years earlier. He said he recently requested that the archdiocese reimburse his counseling costs after reading recent news articles about the archdiocese's payments for counseling to other alleged victims.

Reynolds, the archdiocesan official, said the church cannot comment on the case while it is in police hands.

"I can tell you we've applied our policies," he said, adding that before police were involved, the archdiocese reviewed Hemmerle's records and interviewed several former colleagues and supervisors.

"I wish I could show you (how they have been followed) but I can't do that in the middle of an investigation."

Norris, however, questions whether the archdiocese followed its policy on handling complaints of sexual abuse. The policy calls for church officials to investigate claims and interview accusers. Norris said he was never interviewed about the alleged abuse and considers his meeting with Kelly to have been pastoral in nature.

Trinity President Rob Mullen declined to comment and referred all questions to Reynolds. The archdiocese owns and operates the high school.

But a priest who worked at Camp Tall Trees when Norris attended said he was "stunned" to hear of the allegation against Hemmerle.

The Rev. Donald Springman, who also worked with Hemmerle at Trinity for several years, said he "couldn't think of anything" that would raise a concern about Hemmerle's behavior.

"He was there for so many years doing such good work," said Springman. He noted the camp was long popular with boys. "They kept coming back every year, and so many of them became counselors."

In a 1999 article in The Courier-Journal, several people associated with Camp Tall Trees lauded Hemmerle's decades of work there, saying he set a good example as an active, charismatic priest who didn't mind playing softball in the mud.

Hemmerle, a native of the California neighborhood who attended the old St. Benedict Catholic Elementary School, has been a priest since 1967.

Since his ordination, Hemmerle has taught religion at Trinity. He has coached wrestling, cross country and track teams. Trinity named Hemmerle an honorary alumnus in 2000 in tribute to his service.

According to past editions of the Official Catholic Directory, a national reference book published annually, Hemmerle was also in residence at St. Thomas-St. Vincent Home for neglected and dependent children in Anchorage between 1970 and 1982. The home closed in 1983. He has since lived at St. Bartholomew parish rectory.

From 1971 through last year, he directed Camp Tall Trees. He also served as a counselor there from 1957 through 1966.

### **National scandal**

In his Sept. 19 letter, Norris confronted Hemmerle with his allegation: "I doubt you remember me, but unfortunately I have had to deal with memories of you almost on a daily basis," he wrote.

In an interview, Norris said the episode is not a case of recovered memory — a controversial syndrome in which a person recalls a long-suppressed memory. Instead, Norris said he always remembered the alleged episode.

He said he no longer practices the Catholic faith. He said he is unable to

see a priest conducting Mass without thinking of the abuse and how the church handled it.

"As you can imagine, the Camp Tall Trees incident had huge impact on my self-esteem and self-confidence," Norris wrote Hemmerle in his letter. "I felt dirty and didn't feel good about myself."

Norris began pursuing his complaint more than three months before the Roman Catholic Church in the United States was rocked by newspaper reports from Boston that there had been sexual abuse of minors by priests of the Boston Archdiocese — and that the cardinal who leads the archdiocese had covered up the scandal. Since those stories broke, allegations of past abuse by priests in other parts of the country have come to light.

The Courier-Journal reported April 14 that the Rev. Louis E. Miller retired in March after the archdiocese said it received the latest of several allegations he sexually molested children in the 1960s and 1970s.

Since then, 32 people have sued the archdiocese, alleging abuse by Miller, five other priests and a parochial school teacher.

Also in March, a Carmelite priest who worked at DeSales High School in Louisville from 1966 to 1973 was fired as principal of a Los Angeles Catholic high school after allegations arose of sexual misconduct with teenage boys in California and in five incidents in Louisville.

Previously there had been only two publicly known cases of clergy sexually abusing children in the archdiocese — the convictions of a priest and a deacon in the 1980s.

In statements since January — when the issue of child sexual abuse by priests began receiving nationwide attention — Kelly and other archdiocesan officials have stressed that known molesters will never again be assigned to work with children.

Reynolds acknowledged, however, that not all cases are clear cut.

While not discussing Hemmerle's case in particular, Reynolds said there are some cases that cannot be definitively proved or disproved. In such cases, a priest might "be assigned to a limited ministry in some kind of supervised setting," he said.

He also acknowledged "it takes a great deal of courage for someone to come forward to contact the archdiocese" with an accusation against a priest.

"Our starting point is to believe the person coming in the door (while) we also have to respect the rights of the accused," Reynolds said. But the accuser is "one of many voices" the archdiocese listens to in assessing claims.

When Norris wrote his first letter to Hemmerle he asked for a response by Dec. 1 that would indicate Hemmerle would get counseling and end his nonsupervised work with those under age 18.

Deacon Brian Karley, the director of clergy personnel for the archdiocese, wrote on Sept. 25 that Kelly had been made aware of Norris' allegations and that the church took them seriously and had arranged for Hemmerle to be evaluated.

Karley wrote Norris again on Nov. 21 and said that Hemmerle "was thoroughly evaluated as a result of your allegations by the archdiocesan psychologist and a complete psychological evaluation has been made." No results were provided.

"This response is also being sent on behalf of (Hemmerle) since the



BY MICHAEL CLEVENGER, THE COURIER-JOURNAL

**Brian Reynolds, chief administrative officer for the Louisville archdiocese, said the archdiocese followed all of its usual policies when it receives an allegation of sexual abuse by an employee.**

archbishop believes he should have no contact with you. Both Archbishop Kelly and I thank you for your complaint and trust that you will continue your healing."

Norris said he received no phone calls before that Nov. 21 letter. Reynolds said there have been "numerous phone calls" between the archdiocese and Norris, but he would not say when they took place.

Norris wrote on Nov. 30 to press for more information. After that letter Kelly called him and they arranged to meet on Christmas Eve, when Norris would be in town to visit family.

Michael Norris and his father both attended the meeting, in which they said Kelly showed real concern for the pain Michael said he had endured and expressed concern for his spiritual well-being.

Both Norrises said Kelly did not indicate whether he believed the accusation.

They also said Kelly told them that a man's sexual appetite greatly decreases in his 50s and thus would no longer be a threat of abusing young children. The elder Norris repeated this claim in an e-mail to Karley on April 17 and asked if Kelly had made this statement to the Kentucky State Police.

Reynolds said that he could not comment on the Norrises' conversation with Kelly and that it is difficult to talk about one phrase without knowing the larger context of the conversation.

Donald Norris also said in the e-mail to Karley that Kelly had told him that Hemmerle was willing to take a lie detector test. Norris asked Karley if Hemmerle had done so.

Reynolds declined to comment on the question of a lie detector test or any other conversation between Kelly and the Norrises, citing the pending investigation.

Michael Norris said in an interview he was "absolutely" willing to take a lie detector test.

#### **Norris' background**

Norris and his family acknowledge that Norris had disciplinary problems as a student at Trinity. Norris said he recalled taking Hemmerle's religion class and Hemmerle telling him he would end up in jail some day.

Norris said he left Trinity and later

dropped out of Fern Creek High School. Military records show he later served in the U.S. Navy from 1979 to 1983 as an aviation electronics technician.

Returning home after an honorable discharge, he went to the University of Louisville, earning a bachelor's degree in engineering science in 1989 and a master's degree in chemical engineering in 1990, school officials said. Norris said he then moved to Houston, where he began working for a petroleum company and now works at a chemical firm.

But as his first marriage headed for divorce in 1997, he said he began to recognize that his alleged past abuse was affecting his relationships.

In interviews over the past two months, Norris' parents have said they believe their son's account of the abuse, as do Norris' present wife and several of his siblings interviewed by The Courier-Journal.

They said he has nothing to gain from going public with allegations that could only shine a spotlight on him and his large, close-knit family.

"Mike's not a liar and he doesn't have any reason to" lie, said his brother, Steve Norris.

"There is no doubt in our mind" the abuse happened, said Michael's father, Donald. He spoke in an interview with his wife, Judith, in the kitchen of their Fern Creek home, where a crucifix hangs prominently on the wall. Norris' mother and a sister said they remembered him coming home from camp with a bad case of poison ivy.

Michael Norris informed his parents of the alleged abuse about five years ago, and at least one sibling learned about it indirectly. Others learned only recently when Michael alerted them as he prepared to go public.

Bridget Fehr, a sister, said her biggest regret is that Michael may have been reluctant to tell them earlier because they had remained devout Catholics.

"In reality it has been my faith that has helped me support and pray for him," she added. "Although I find fault with the archdiocese and the structure of the priesthood, I have separated my faith from this aspect of the Catholic Church."