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Metairie deacon V.M. Wheeler removed from ministry after abuse allegations

BY MATT SLEDGE | STAFF WRITER

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V.M. Wheeler

Advocate file photo

Matt Sledge

The Archdiocese of New Orleans has removed a recently ordained deacon from ministry at a Metairie church after receiving an allegation

that he abused a child 20 years ago, church officials announced Monday.

Archbishop Gregory Aymond removed Deacon V.M. Wheeler from his post at St. Francis Xavier Parish in Old Metairie.

In addition to serving as a deacon since his 2018 ordination, Wheeler, 63, is a partner at the well-known Chaffe McCall law firm. Archdiocese officials said they didn't receive a "formal" report of abuse until last week.

Wheeler was listed as one of the parish's three deacons as recently as Sunday's parish bulletin.

“His ministry at St. Francis Xavier was not with children, and we have no other complaints against him, nor do we have record of any concerns from families at the parish,” said Sarah McDonald, a spokeswoman for the archdiocese.

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In the Catholic Church, deacons must be ordained but typically have day jobs in the secular world. Unlike priests, they are allowed to marry, provided they do so before ordination.

Archdiocesan officials said they notified law enforcement of the alleged abuse. They did not offer details about the alleged abuse -- such as the age or gender of the alleged victim, or where it occurred -- but said that anyone with knowledge about it should contact the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office. A JPSO spokesman confirmed it had been in contact with the archdiocese and likewise urged people with information to come forward.

An attorney for Wheeler said he was “shocked” by the allegation.

“I am shocked that any kind of claim would be made against V.M. He has the highest character and just the greatest reputation in the community for honesty and integrity,” said the lawyer, Eddie Castaing. “V.M. learned of this today, had no hint or knowledge that anything like this was being said about him. It’s just too early to make any comments.”

Wheeler has been a member of the state bar since 1984, when he graduated from Tulane Law School. Chaffee McCall, the law firm where Wheeler is a partner, is one of the most prominent in the city. In addition to practicing law, Wheeler has been an investment banker in New York, Dallas and Houston, according to a biography that was removed from the firm's website on Monday.

He's also served on a variety of local nonprofit boards, including the Catholic Foundation of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the Tulane Fund Advisory Board and the Loyola University New Orleans Alumni Association.

In a statement, Chaffe McCall said that it supported “the right of all victims of sexual abuse to speak out and be heard.”

The firm continued, “Mr. Wheeler has been employed at Chaffe McCall since 2016. We take this matter very seriously and are taking appropriate action. As this is a confidential personnel matter, we are not able to comment further at this time.”
