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## Lessons learned: St. Louis archbishop-elect leaves a community still reeling from a bombshell report on clergy sex abuse

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Bishop Mitchell Rozanski, of Springfield, Massachusetts, speaks during a press conference to announce him as the next Archbishop of St. Louis at the Cathedral Basilica in St. Louis on Wednesday, June 10, 2020. Bishop Rozanski's installation is currently scheduled for Sunday, Aug. 25. Archbishop Robert J. Carlson will remain with the archdiocese as an apostolic administrator until the installation. Photo by Colter Peterson, [cpeterson@post-dispatch.com](mailto:cpeterson@post-dispatch.com)

Colter Peterson

ST. LOUIS — A narrator’s voice on a show about the Sistine Chapel triggered John Doe’s memories of horror he experienced as a 9-year-old altar boy. He survived being gang raped and other abuses by Roman Catholic clergy that were so traumatic they took some 50 years to resurface.

Doe ultimately wanted the Springfield Diocese in western Massachusetts to know what had been done to him in the early 1960s — not just by rank-and-file priests, but by the late Bishop Christopher J. Weldon, whose reputation was still untarnished from leading the diocese from 1950 to 1977.

Doe’s quest for justice, however, would victimize him even more. It took six years for his story to be validated, and only after initial investigations by church officials were found to be rife with mistakes and possible deception.

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The case is relevant here because it offers a window into the leadership style of St. Louis Archbishop-elect Mitchell T. Rozanski. He has been bishop of the Springfield diocese since Doe first reported his claim there.

“I want to apologize for the chronic mishandling of this case, time and time again since 2014,” Rozanski said at a news conference in June. “At almost every instance, we have failed this courageous man who nonetheless persevered thanks in part to a reliable support network as well to a deep desire for a just response for the terrible abuse which he endured.”

Many apologies and promises have been made to try to rebuild credibility since the clergy sex abuse scandal erupted in Boston in 2002. New rules were adopted that year to establish a better infrastructure to deal with abuse claims.

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Bishops still retain authority, but dioceses are now required to have written policies, victim assistance and review boards to help keep serial abusers from being quietly moved to different parishes. Observers of the Doe case say these efforts to create

transparency haven't gone far enough to give victims justice.

When Doe was compelled to report his abuse in 2014, he first paid a visit to a man who'd been the head altar boy at a church where he said he was held down and assaulted decades ago. Unlike Doe, the man he visited had gone on to enter the priesthood, eventually becoming a monsignor.

The monsignor referred Doe to the vicar of priests, who also brought a victim advocate. According to the recent investigation, all three of the church officials were mandated reporters. None of them notified the district attorney — nor filed any notes about the encounter with the alleged victim. An intake sheet wasn't completed until 2018.

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From there, the complaint fell deeper into a dark pit until the Berkshire Eagle, a small newspaper in western Massachusetts, started publishing bold stories and editorials that exposed inconsistencies in the handling of the Doe case and **called** for an independent investigation.

Though advocates say he was slow to act, Rozanski eventually sought an independent investigation. The diocese hired retired Superior Court Judge Peter A. Velis to lead it. Nearly a year later, on June 21, 2020, Velis wrote in the **373-page report** that Doe's claims of sexual molestation by Bishop Weldon were "unequivocally credible," both as a principal and "coventurer" of anal rape, indecent assault and battery and intentional infliction of emotional distress.

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The investigation suggested that there may have been deceptive practices by a private investigator hired by the diocese, manipulated reports and that the Diocesan Review Board was in "dire need of changes." Velis wrote that "from the inception of the complaint through the follow-up process, the procedure was greatly flawed."

And the procedure was toothless when it came to dealing with allegations against a former bishop.

“Significantly,” Velis wrote, “in evaluating the actions of those involved in the Weldon assessment, I found that there was a reluctance to fervently pursue an evaluation of allegations against him due to his prominence and revered legacy in the religious community.”



Most Rev. Christopher J. Weldon, Bishop of Springfield, Mass., during procession to receive the Crozier (symbol of office) from the Most Rev. Richard J. Cushing, archbishop of Boston, March 28, 1950 at St. Michael's Cathedral. (AP Photo/Abe Fox)

Abe Fox

## 'Beyond awful'

Rozanski, 61, grew up in Baltimore and spent his career there until he was sent to western Massachusetts in 2014. Rozanski was installed as bishop of Springfield by Cardinal Sean O'Malley, of Boston, who has been a point person for Pope Francis on addressing clergy sex abuse for the global church.

At the time, Rozanski was also finishing a seven-year stint with the Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People and had served in other leadership positions with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Springfield, a small diocese with a tumultuous record, proved to be a testing ground. In 2004, the first U.S. bishop indicted on sex abuse charges in the modern era was from there. State statutes of limitations were part of what hampered his **prosecution**. The high-profile murder of an altar boy in 1972 **remains unsolved**.

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“Springfield, in my opinion, is worse than Boston,” said John Stobierski, a lawyer who has represented about 100 people abused by clergy in the diocese.

Since 1992, the diocese has paid out at least 147 abuse claims totaling \$15 million. In 2018, the diocese spent at least \$150,000 on therapy for victims.

Stobierski said the diocese hasn’t been a friendly environment for victims of sexual abuse while Rozanski has been at the helm, as illustrated by the handling of Doe’s allegations against Bishop Weldon.

“To kind of stick your head in the sand — I hear no evil, I see no evil until it’s confirmed — that’s a failure of one’s duty to manage the diocese,” Stobierski said.

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Rozanski told retired Judge Velis during his investigation of the Doe case that he hadn’t heard the contents of the complaint until reading about it in a **May 2019 article** in the Berkshire Eagle written by reporter Larry Parnass. Doe had made his case directly to the review board in June 2018 because he was uncertain if the diocesan investigator accurately relayed all the information he’d shared.

In the May 2019 article, Parnass reported that the diocese had failed to name Bishop Weldon on its public list of clergy credibly accused of child sexual abuse, even though a September 2018 letter from the chairman of the Diocesan Review Board to Doe said they found his testimony about being abused by Weldon and two other priests “compelling and credible.” Rozanski was copied on the letter, though it’s unclear whether he received or read it.

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What is clear is that the diocese carefully crafted a response and asked for a correction to the news story, saying that the review board had found Doe's allegations against two priests credible, but not those against Bishop Weldon. According to copies of internal emails included in the Velis report, an attorney for the diocese recommended taking out a reference to Bishop Weldon being present in a group setting where boys were being sexually abused.

"At the end it should be that the individual said Bishop Weldon never abused him," the attorney wrote diocese officials. "On the possibility of Bishop being present, I would say the allegation was Bishop had actual knowledge of the abuse or he should have known because he was present at a gathering where some abuse took place. Can we say it was a large gathering I can't tell[?]"

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The longtime communications director for the diocese was also protective in what was included in the statement.

"My only concern is we may be feeding him more information than we need to and inadvertently fueling this story," he wrote in the correspondence.

Though the official letter to the Eagle appeared to be crafted by others, it was formally sent from the chairman of the volunteer review board.

**Parnass responded by writing a story** about how three witnesses to the 2018 review board meeting at which Doe had presented his case disputed the claims in the correction letter. One of them, Dr. Patricia Martin, 65, a clinical psychologist, practicing Catholic and former review board member, said the diocese was orchestrating a cover-up.

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"They are trying to cover (Weldon's) reputation rather than support a victim," Martin told the Eagle. "It's beyond awful. It makes me so angry that they would deny it now. They're lying."

After that article, Rozanski agreed to meet with Doe in June 2019. Soon after, Rozanski called for the investigation by retired Judge Velis. The findings were released on June 24, two weeks after **Rozanski was introduced** as the next St. Louis archbishop at a news conference at the Cathedral Basilica here.

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St. Louis Archbishop Robert J. Carlson described Rozanski, who is scheduled to be installed as his successor on Aug. 25, as a needed breath of fresh air. Rozanski described himself as a parish priest at heart, who likes to be out among the people.

“You can be a parish priest, but you need to be a damn good administrator,” said Stobierski, the lawyer. “That’s where I saw the problems that led to this investigation. The survivor had to go to the newspaper for help.”

Olan Horne, 60, a resident of western Massachusetts, has been an advocate for Doe and also went on a hunger strike in 2019 to bring attention to the handling of two other cases in the Springfield diocese. Horne, a survivor of clergy sex abuse he suffered as a child growing up near Boston, met with Pope Benedict XVI in 2008.

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“We were promised accountability,” Horne said of his visit with the former pontiff. “This is not accountability.”

Robert Hoatson, co-founder of Road to Recovery, a victim advocacy organization, has called on Rozanski to resign and for Pope Francis to rescind Rozanski’s promotion.

“I know the church is not going to change,” said Hoatson, 68, a former priest from New Jersey and survivor of clergy sex abuse. “But the people in St. Louis should know they are getting a person who covers up.”

## ‘A call to action’

Until recently, the Springfield diocese had just one private investigator to look into allegations of abuse. That investigator, a retired state trooper, reported to the volunteer review board, which is supposed to weigh findings and victim statements.

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Rozanski told retired Judge Velis in his investigation of the Doe case that it was standard protocol to learn about allegations of abuse from the review board chairman. Rozanski said he didn't read reports or findings produced by the diocesan investigator.

"I take my cue from the review board," Rozanski said.

Though he would occasionally meet with the victim advocate to get updates on investigations, he said he trusted her because of her experience in abuse cases.

"I am more pastoral," he said.

Velis noted in the report that Rozanski's apparent hands-off approach was quickly changing.

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"One could easily glean from his demeanor and the remainder of his interview that those days are over," he wrote, adding: "It is clear to the investigators that Bishop Rozanski never saw any investigative reports regarding the Complainant's accusations of Weldon. He relied completely on what was told to him by others within the hierarchy of his staff."

Velis wrote that Rozanski "immediately felt a call to action" once he was aware of possible discrepancies in the handling of Doe's complaint. Rozanski told him that he wanted the truth to be found out.

Velis wrote that the diocese was cooperative with his investigation but that documents surfaced that weren't initially supplied, including a report from the diocesan investigator's one visit with Doe that "engendered the pursuit of a new path in the entire investigation" by Velis.



It turns out there were two reports of the investigator's findings, including one that more clearly accused Bishop Weldon of abusing Doe. That version of the report wasn't shared with the review board.

Velis wrote that the possible mishandling of the investigator's report "raises the question" of an attempt to keep the contents from the review board and or Rozanski. But he noted that it was not his investigation's responsibility "to determine who was responsible for initiating what could be perceived as a deceptive practice, if and when the reports were switched."

Even though Rozanski told Velis that he was not aware of the contents of Doe's allegations of abuse by Bishop Weldon, nor the differing reports by the diocesan investigator, Rozanski said he was aware that Weldon was accused of being "present during incidents of abuse that occurred," which Rozanski recognized as a form of abuse.

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## 'Upfront on everything'

The Velis report goes to great length and yet still begs many follow-up questions.

Asked about Rozanski's integrity, during a short telephone interview with the Post-Dispatch, Velis described him as honest.

"This bishop, as far as I am concerned, was upfront on everything," Velis said. "He was quick to say it was a mistake to rely fully on the board to report to him. He said this is not going to happen in the future."

In addition to apologizing to Doe, Rozanski has touted to his flock a memorandum of understanding with district attorneys in which the diocese will report all allegations of sex abuse to authorities. A task force was formed to help adopt some of the recommendations of the Velis report.

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The victim advocate and the investigator who worked with Doe are no longer employed by the diocese. They've been replaced. The diocese says it now has a "panel" of four investigators to study allegations of sex abuse "using trauma-informed and investigative best practices."

The chairman of the review board, John Hale, quit, as did a former chair. Hale said in an interview that he's also giving up on being Catholic. While serving on the volunteer board about 15 years, he heard about 400 claims of misconduct and abuse, the contents of which he's tried to forget after each meeting.

"The only thing I am interested in at this point is my salvation and my family," he said.

Rozanski replaced Hale, a retired master sergeant in the Air Force who went to law school, with an interim chairman who is a survivor of clergy sex abuse.

As for Weldon's legacy, his name has been stripped from a Catholic hospital's rehab center. The diocese says it's taking down pictures and memorabilia related to him. **His remains** at Gate of Heaven Cemetery are to be relocated.

 41 comments

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Jesse Bogan is a reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

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