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A mural is seen above the altar at St. Peter Catholic Church, Aug. 22 in Steubenville, Ohio. Fr. Bradley Greer, chancellor of the Diocese of Steubenville, and Fr. Timothy Huffman, parochial vicar at St. Peter, are seeking legal custody of a small child in an unusual case scheduled for a juvenile court hearing in October. (OSV News/Christopher Dacanay)



by Jenn Morson

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A [Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#) article this summer described an "unusual and ongoing court battle" with a toddler and his unlikely caregivers: the pastor and parochial vicar of St. Peter Catholic Church in Steubenville, Ohio, Frs. Timothy Huffman and Bradley Greer.\*

It said the child's parents felt betrayed after seeking help from the church, but according to publicly available court documents, the priests acted as private citizens, not representatives of the church when they sought emergency custody of the minor child in December 2022.

### **How did two priests end up with custody of a toddler?**

According to the court records, in late Spring of 2022, Jorden and Edgar Pauley moved to Steubenville, along with their infant son who was born that April. After their living situation proved unsustainable, the Pauleys were unhoused, and sought assistance at the [Friendship Room](#), a local ministry that provides assistance to "the lost and forgotten people in the Ohio Valley."

Jon Sowers, a retired Steubenville police detective, told NCR that Molly McGovern, a cofounder of Friendship Room, was able to help the Pauley family with their material needs including housing. As is often the case with Friendship Room guests, McGovern found local supporters to provide food, household items, as well as baby items for the family. "They had lost their housing and needed a place to stay, and Molly was able to help them apply for public housing," said Sowers.

That June, the Pauleys began repeatedly leaving the baby at Friendship Room for extended periods of time, according to the court documents and Fran Carinci, one of two attorneys representing the priests in the custody proceedings. Huffman was often called upon to pray with the guests there, many of whom are victims of human trafficking as well as those with drug addictions, since his parish is in close geographical proximity. It was during this time that he first encountered the Pauley

baby, who was then spending significant time there.

According to Carinci, there were multiple occasions where the mother left the infant in the care of McGovern overnight. During these extended visits to Friendship Room, the workers observed that the child seemed underweight and underdeveloped for 8 weeks of age. "He was 2 months old, he was often dehydrated, and he wasn't being fed or cared for properly," Carinci said.

One night in late June, McGovern was out of town, and the mother attempted to leave the baby overnight at Friendship Room, but the workers there did not feel comfortable with that arrangement. According to Carinci, around 10 p.m., the mother decided to leave the child across the street with a woman whom the workers knew had recently lost custody of her own children. McGovern instructed her employees to contact Huffman for assistance in her absence. "Huffman said to them, just bring him here," Carinci said. "They're standing there just wondering what to do with a child, but they reached out to a female parishioner who helped them get diapers and formula."



St. Peter Catholic Church in Steubenville, Ohio, is pictured in an Aug. 22 photo. (OSV News/Christopher Dacanay)

The next morning, according to Sowers, the priests contacted Steubenville Bishop Jeffrey Monforton and Fr. James Dunfee, diocesan vicar general, to let them know of the situation. All of those contacted understood this to be done in the interest of the child, and affirmed that they had followed [protocol](#) as another adult was present. Sowers also confirmed that the priests contacted the Children Services Division of Jefferson County, Ohio, which they were required to do as mandatory reporters.

According to Sowers, this was not the first call that had been made regarding the welfare of this child. Two workers from Friendship Room with medical backgrounds had also raised concerns about the child's health and contacted Children Services prior to the priests' call seeking intervention. Coincidentally, Sowers was the lead investigator of the criminal case against Franciscan Fr. David Morrier, former campus minister at Franciscan University of Steubenville who [pled guilty](#) to sexual battery in 2022. Sowers also became acquainted with the priests who offered counsel to Morrier's victim throughout the police investigation.

After the child spent one week in the priests' care, the parents came to retrieve him. Unsure how to proceed, they contacted Sowers, who brought the child to the police station. Once again, Children Services was contacted for assistance. The nurse who examined him did not feel he was in any danger and released him to the parents, stating that they would monitor the situation, however the court records state that no further intervention occurred.

By late July, the parents again began leaving the child with the priests, which continued for the next several months, often overnight. Carinci said the priests felt trapped as they feared for the baby's safety if they were to say no. They relied on women parishioners to assist in the child's care in order to maintain their priestly duties to the parish and community.

According to court documents, between July and November, the baby was at the rectory four to five nights each week. Carinci said this was often after the mother texted the priests in the middle of the night to demand they retrieve the child. The complaint for custody document alleges that on one occasion, the mother had put the child in timeout for misbehaving: he was 5 months old. Carinci said that when the mother contacted Greer to come and pick the child up, the mother requested

the child not be allowed anything enjoyable as he was to remain in timeout for the entire day.



A car is seen parked outside the office of St. Peter Catholic Church, Aug. 22 in Steubenville, Ohio. (OSV News/Christopher Dacanay)

### **Seeking emergency custody**

In December of 2022, the mother told the priests that she and her husband would be taking the child to Norfolk, Virginia, in order to visit her father who had recently been released from prison where he had spent time for child abuse. From November until that time, the baby had spent 31 of 38 days in the priests' care. Fearing that the mother would be unable to safely parent the child during a trip, Carinci said that the priests determined there was no other way to protect the child from leaving the state except by filing for emergency custody.

According to Ohio law, because Children Services had never opened an investigation nor been a part of any ongoing monitoring of the child, they have no standing in this

case. "This is a private matter, and there is no authority by anyone other than the judge to place the child," Carinci said.

Because the priests had been caring for the child, Carinci said they had standing to file for temporary custody, which was granted by the judge and has been repeatedly continued. "The mother has never asked for the order to be reconsidered," she said.

While many commenters have criticized the priests and the courts for not placing the child in foster care, Carinci reiterated that this was not possible. "This is what a lot of people have said, but that's not a legal option," Carinci said. "Children Services would be the only one who could have that authority."

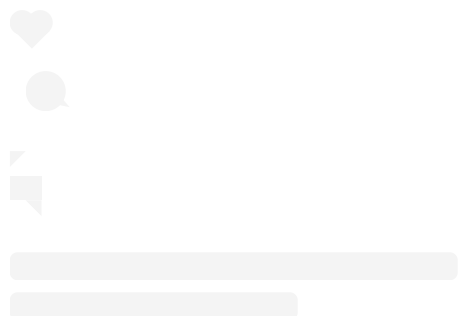
As many commenters noted online, Jefferson County Children Services has been under scrutiny for failing to provide sufficient intervention, often tragically. In September of 2020, [WTOV9 reported](#) that in the five years prior, three children that had interaction with Jefferson County Child Protective Services had died from neglect and/or abuse.

Carinci told NCR that the priests are court ordered to make the child available to the mother whenever she requests visitation. "What I find most compelling is that [the mother] has never asked for him. She never visited him at Christmas or his birthday, and she's never even brought him a present," Carinci said. "She sets times to visit him but doesn't follow through."

Since the priests were granted emergency custody in December of 2022, Jordan Pauley has visited with her child a total of 20 hours. And from last August until Aug. 11 of this year 2024, Carinci said Pauley has visited with the child for 3.5 hours.



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A post shared by Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (@pittsburghpg)

## **Parishioners react**

Andrew Caraballo's family have been parishioners at St. Peter's since 2021. While several social media commenters from the local area expressed concern that the details of this situation had been "suppressed" or "hush hush," Caraballo said the priests have been transparent in their role while still respecting the minor child's right to privacy. "They hold him as they greet parishioners outside of the church after Mass," he said. "It's not hidden at all."

According to Caraballo, he first learned of the unusual situation one Saturday afternoon after he and his wife received the sacrament of confession. "Our son is very close in age [to the child]. Father Huffman came up to us and asked what type of bottle we were using because he needed recommendations."

Caraballo understands that this is a fascinating story, but he is shocked by how it was described in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. "I understand why it's confusing or surprising, but having seen it all unfold, I know that the priests have worked hard to fulfill their duties and take care of everyone involved," he said. "The article was such a warped version of the story that it seemed intentionally misleading."

As others react to that article, Caraballo has felt defensive of his pastor. "It's particularly offensive to me that people are connecting this case to clergy abuse, given the fact that Father Huffman has been such an outspoken supporter of a local clergy abuse victim," he said. "He was someone who put himself in a tough position against his colleagues by standing up for [the victim]. By taking care of this child, he's doing the same thing again. Helping someone at great cost to his own reputation."

Other parishioners who did not wish to be identified affirmed Caraballo's impression of the situation, and shared that they were grateful the priests were able to offer a safe haven for the child.

'I understand why it's confusing or surprising, but having seen it all unfold, I know that the priests have worked hard to fulfill their duties and take care of everyone involved.'

—Andrew Caraballo, St. Peter's parishioner

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### **Violation of child protection policy?**

Many critics of this arrangement have suggested that two priests should not be granted custody as doing so would violate the [Diocese of Steubenville's Decree on Child Protection](#), but Carinci, who serves on the Diocesan Child Protection Review Board, offered several clarifications. "The priests have violated nothing," Carinci said. "There is no complaint being investigated, because no complaint exists. The child is there with parental consent."



Sowers also clarified the decree's intention. "The child protection policies of the diocese deal only with ministerial issues," he said. "This is not a ministry. This is a personal matter."

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## **Moving forward**

Pauley is now considered the noncustodial parent of her first two children, because in August of this year, Jorden Pauley's mother, Brenda Tarutis, sued for, and was granted temporary custody of, Pauley's second child. Previously, Tarutis had filed for custody of the firstborn child, but she has since discontinued her petition.

During the process of court hearings, the child's biological paternity was questioned and tests revealed that Edgar Pauley was not the father. Because this was no longer a case involving the married parents of a child, the case has been transferred to juvenile court, where it will be continued.

On Sept. 10, 2023, Jorden Pauley announced her engagement on social media to a man other than Edgar Pauley.

Sowers told NCR he was surprised by the number of errors in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette story. "The implication is that there is something secret, but this case was filed in open court," he said. "And the court documents clearly contradict what is being reported."

The child celebrated his second birthday in April, and the priests have been significant caregivers of him since he was 2 months old, with legal custody being continued from December 2022, until the present time.

Caraballo said the child is very bonded to both priests after all of this time in their care. "You can't just give kids away," he said. "And even if it were something they could legally do, how would that affect his development?"

The next custody hearing for this case is scheduled for October.

*\*This story has been updated to include the priests' first names.*