



Gayle Benson, widow of NFL New Orleans Saints and NBA New Orleans Pelicans owner Tom Benson, walks down the steps to receive his casket with New Orleans Archbishop Gregory Aymond for visitation at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans on March 21, 2018. (AP file photo/Gerald Herbert)

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New Orleans — February 3, 2025

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As New Orleans church leaders braced for the fallout from publishing a list of predatory Catholic priests, they turned to an unlikely ally: the front office of the city's NFL franchise.

What followed was a monthslong, crisis-communications blitz orchestrated by the New Orleans Saints' president and other top team officials, according to hundreds of internal emails obtained by The Associated Press.

The records, which the Saints and church had long sought to keep out of public view, reveal team executives played a more extensive role than previously known in a public relations campaign to mitigate fallout from the clergy sexual abuse crisis. The emails shed new light on the Saints' foray into a fraught topic far from the gridiron, a behind-the-scenes effort driven by the team's devoutly Catholic owner who has long enjoyed a close relationship with the city's embattled archbishop.

They also showed how various New Orleans institutions — from a sitting federal judge to the local media — rallied around church leaders at a critical moment.

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Among the key moments, as revealed in the Saints' own emails:

- Saints executives were so involved in the church's damage control that a team spokesman briefed his boss on a 2018 call with the city's top prosecutor hours before the church released a list of clergymen accused of abuse. The call, the spokesman said, "allowed us to take certain people off" the list.
- Team officials were among the first people outside the church to view that list, a carefully curated, yet undercounted roster of suspected pedophiles. The disclosure of those names invited civil claims against the church and drew attention from federal and state law enforcement.

- The team's president, Dennis Lauscha, drafted more than a dozen questions that Archbishop Gregory Aymond should be prepared to answer as he faced reporters.
- The Saints' senior vice president of communications, Greg Bensel, provided fly-on-the-wall updates to Lauscha about local media interviews, suggesting church and team leaders were all on the same team. "He is doing well," Bensel wrote as the archbishop told reporters the church was committed to addressing the crisis. "That is our message," Bensel added, "that we will not stop here today."

The emails obtained by AP sharply undercut assurances the Saints gave fans about the public relations guidance five years ago when they asserted they had provided only "minimal" assistance to the church. The team went to court to keep its internal emails secret.

"This is disgusting," said state Rep. Mandie Landry, D-New Orleans. "As a New Orleans resident, taxpayer and Catholic, it doesn't make any sense to me why the Saints would go to these lengths to protect grown men who raped children. All of them should have been just as horrified at the allegations."



Former New Orleans district attorney Leon Cannizzaro, who will work for Louisiana Republican Gov. Jeff Landry's administration, arrives for Landry's inauguration ceremony at the State Capitol building in Baton Rouge, La., Jan. 7, 2024. (AP file photo/Matthew Hinton)

The Saints told AP last week that the partnership is a thing of the past. The emails cover a yearlong period ending in July 2019, when they were subpoenaed by attorneys for victims of a priest later charged with raping an 8-year-old boy.

In a lengthy statement, the team criticized the media for using "leaked emails for the purpose of misconstruing a well-intended effort."

"No member of the Saints organization condones or wants to cover up the abuse that occurred in the Archdiocese of New Orleans," the team said. "That abuse occurred is a terrible fact."

The team's response did little to quell the anger of survivors of clergy sexual abuse. "We felt betrayed by the organization," said Kevin Bourgeois, a former Saints season ticket holder who was abused by a priest in the 1980s. "It forces me to question what other secrets are being withheld. I'm angry, hurt and re-traumatized again."

## **Emails reveal extent of help**

After the AP first reported on the alliance in early 2020, Saints owner Gayle Benson denied that anyone "associated with our organizations made recommendations or had input" on the list of pedophile priests.

The Saints reiterated that denial in its statement Saturday, saying no Saints employees "had any responsibility for adding or removing any names from that list." The team said that no employees offered "any input, suggestions or opinions as to who should be included or omitted from" the list.

Leon Cannizzaro, the district attorney at the time, last week denied any role in shaping the credibly accused clergy list, echoing statements he made in 2020. He told AP he "absolutely had no involvement in removing any names from any list." Cannizzaro said he did not know why the Saints' spokesman would have reported he had been on a call related to the list.





The fleur-de-lis logo of the New Orleans Saints is displayed on the 50-yard line of the field after an NFL preseason football game between the New Orleans Saints and the Tennessee Titans, Aug. 25, 2024, in New Orleans. (AP file photo/Tyler Kaufman)

The emails, sent from Saints accounts, don't specify which clergymen were removed from the list or why. They raise fresh questions, however, about the Saints' role in a scandal that has taken on much larger legal and financial stakes since the team waded into it, potentially in violation of the NFL's policy against conduct "detrimental to the league."

## **A coalescing of New Orleans institutions**

The outsized role of Saints executives could draw new attention from NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, who is scheduled to address reporters Monday as New Orleans prepares to host its 11th Super Bowl. Messages requesting comment were sent to the NFL.

Taken together, the emails portray a coalescing of several New Orleans institutions. U.S. District Judge Jay Zainey, who was copied by the Saints on the public relations efforts, cheered Bensel on from his personal email account, thanking the team's spokesman "for the wonderful advice." A newspaper editor similarly thanked Bensel for getting involved.

"You have hit all the points," Zainey, a fellow Catholic, wrote in another email to Bensel, praising a lengthy note the Saints spokesman sent to local newspaper editors. "By his example and leadership, Archbishop Aymond, our shepherd, will continue to lead our Church in the right direction — helping us to learn and to rebuild from the mistakes of the past."

Zainey later struck down a Louisiana law, vigorously opposed by the church, that would have allowed victims to bring civil claims irrespective of how long ago the alleged sex abuse took place. He declined to comment.



New Orleans Saints president Dennis Lauscha attends the NFL football owners spring meetings May 21, 2024, in Nashville, Tenn. (AP file photo/George Walker IV)



## **A watershed moment for the Catholic Church**

The list marked a watershed in heavily Catholic New Orleans — a long-awaited mea culpa to parishioners intended to usher in healing and local accountability. It came at a time when church leaders were seeking to retain public trust — and financial support — as they reckoned with generations of abuse and mounting litigation that eventually drove the Archdiocese of New Orleans into bankruptcy.

That litigation, filed in 2020, involves more than 600 people who say they were abused by clergy. The case has produced a trove of still-secret church records said to document years of abuse claims and a pattern of church leaders transferring clergy without reporting their crimes to law enforcement.

While it has since expanded, the list of accused priests was missing a number of clergy when it was originally released, an earlier AP investigation found.

The AP identified 20 clergymen who had been accused in lawsuits or charged by law enforcement with child sexual abuse who were inexplicably omitted from the New Orleans list — including two who were charged and convicted of crimes.

Still, the list has served as a roadmap for both the FBI and Louisiana State Police, which launched sweeping investigations into New Orleans church leaders' shielding of predatory priests.

Last spring, state police carried out a wide-ranging search warrant at the Archdiocese of New Orleans, seizing records that include communications with the Vatican.

Since the Saints began assisting the archdiocese, at least seven current and former members of the local clergy have been charged with crimes ranging from rape to possession of child sexual abuse material.



This Dec. 1, 2012 file photo shows a silhouette of a crucifix and a stained glass window inside a Catholic Church in New Orleans. In April 2024, Louisiana State Police carried out a sweeping search warrant at the Archdiocese of New Orleans, seeking a long-secreted cache of church records and communications between local church leaders and the Vatican about the church's handling of clergy sexual abuse. (AP/Gerald Herbert)

## **Public relations campaign**

The extent of the abuse remained largely unknown in 2018, a year the Saints won nine consecutive games on the way to an NFC Championship appearance. As the church prepped for a media onslaught, Bensel carried out an aggressive public relations campaign in which he called in favors, prepared talking points and leaned on long-time media contacts to support the church through a "soon-to-be-messy" time.



Far from freelancing, Bensel had the Saints' backing and blessing through what he called a "Galileo moment," suggesting Aymond would be a trailblazer in releasing a credibly accused clergy list at a critical time for the church. In emails to editorial boards, he warned against "casting a critical eye" on the archbishop "is neither beneficial nor right."

He urged the city's newspapers to "work with" the church, reminding them the Saints and New Orleans Pelicans — the city's NBA team, also owned by Benson — had been successful thanks, in part, to their support.

"We did this because we had buy-in from YOU," Bensel wrote to the editors of The Times-Picayune and New Orleans Advocate, "supporting our mission to be the best, to make New Orleans and everything within her bounds the best."

"We are sitting on that opportunity now with the Archdiocese of New Orleans," he added. "We need to tell the story of how this Archbishop is leading us out of this mess."

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— Greg Bensel, Saints' senior vice president of communications

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## **Close relationship between Saints and the Catholic Church**

Benson and Aymond, the archbishop, have been confidants for years. It was the archbishop who introduced Benson to her late husband, Tom Benson, who died in 2018, leaving his widow in control of New Orleans' NFL and NBA franchises.

The Bensons' foundation has given tens of millions of dollars to the archdiocese and other Catholic causes. Along the way, Aymond has flown on the owner's private jet and become almost a part of the team, frequently celebrating pregame Masses.

When the clergy abuse allegations came to a head, Bensel, the Saints' spokesman, worked his contacts in the local media to help shape the story. He had friendly email

exchanges with a Times-Picayune columnist who praised the archbishop for releasing the clergy list. He also asked the newspaper's leadership to keep their communications "confidential, not for publication nor to share with others."

His emails revealed that The Advocate — after Aymond privately complained to the publisher — removed a notice from one online article that had called for clergy abuse victims to reach out.

Kevin Hall, president and publisher of Georges Media, which owns the newspaper, said the publication welcomes engagement from community leaders but that outreach "does not dilute our journalistic standards or keep us from pursuing the truth."

"No one gets preferential treatment in our coverage of the news," he said in a statement. "Over the past six years, we have consistently published in-depth stories highlighting the ongoing serious issues surrounding the archdiocese sex abuse crisis, as well as investigative reports on this matter by WWL-TV and by The Associated Press."

It was The Advocate's reporting that prompted Bensel to help the church, the emails show. He first offered to "chat crisis communications" with church leaders after the newspaper exposed a scandal involving a disgraced deacon, George Brignac, who remained a lay minister even after the archdiocese settled claims he raped an 8-year-old altar boy.

"We have been through enough at Saints to be a help or sounding board," Bensel wrote, "but I don't want to overstep!"