

Nate's Mission: Former Archbishop Rembert Weakland dies: survivors of clergy sexual abuse respond

Posted on Monday, Aug 22, 2022

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Statement by Peter Isely:

This afternoon, it was announced that former Archbishop Rembert Weakland died at age 95.

His legacy, no doubt, will be described as “complex” and “controversial” — appointed to run the Milwaukee Archdiocese, he soon became the liberal icon of the American hierarchy, his hopes to become a Cardinal dashed with the ascendancy of John Paul II and the return and triumph of the conservative church. His many gifts, his concert-level piano playing, his mastery of several languages, and his intellect — will be enumerated and praised.

Yet the specter that cast itself over the life of Weakland, one that his death will not erase or ameliorate, is his role as chief architect in the widespread and systematic abuse of children by clergy of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Thousands of children were harmed under his watch, and he bears the responsibility.

During his tenure as Archbishop of Milwaukee, Weakland transferred dozens of known sex offenders into new assignments where they were warmly welcomed by trusting Catholic families. These offenders then proceeded to abuse their children.

Weakland coerced survivors into signing predatory settlement agreements and wielded the full force of the institutional Church including highly-paid corporate lawyers, complicit law enforcement officials, and the cultural prestige of the Church to prevent survivors from achieving justice.

He led the team that effectively rewrote Wisconsin state law to prevent future abuse claims from moving forward in the court system, [making it “nearly impossible” to file a civil claim against the Church](#). After victims’ cases against Weakland had to be dropped because of this change, he then instructed his lawyers to sue victims for court costs, even in cases where the priests had admitted their crimes to Weakland. No bishop before or after Weakland has deployed such an aggressive tactic to intimidate and silence victims.

His legacy is that after 30 years of continuous public exposure, survivors of clergy sexual abuse in Wisconsin have fewer paths to justice today than they did decades earlier.

If the Archdiocese of Milwaukee wants to repair the harm caused by Archbishop Rembert Weakland, they must start with the truth. Tens of thousands of pages of court-ordered released documents demonstrate Archbishop Weakland’s complicity in the facilitation of child sexual abuse. But this is only a fraction of the material held by Archbishop Jerome Listecki in the archdiocese’s secret archive. Listecki publicly refused to turn this over to Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul last year. He must do so now.