

James M. Janssen



Name	James M. Janssen	Parish Priest
Date of Birth	1922	
Date of Ordination	1948	
Association with LUC	1956-1958	
Position at LUC	Graduate student, psychological counseling	
Date of incident, Location of Incident	1953-1962	Sacred Heart Church, Newton, IA
	1958	Hinsdale, IL
	1959	Delmar, IA
	1960	Davenport, IA
	1961-1966	Fort Madison, IA
	1967-1979	Sugar Creek, IA, Tennessee, Florida, Davenport, IA
	1983	Grand Mound, IA
Number of victims/accusations	At least 39 individual victims	
Case status	Charged, settled	
Status of Individual	Deceased	6/10/15

Fr. James Janssen, another parish priest, joined Loyola University Chicago in 1956. Janssen came from the diocese of Davenport, Iowa, and had previously been incardinated as assistant pastor. He held this position at various churches across the Davenport diocese. Janssen was also a priest consultant to a grade school and worked with the Boy Scouts in his home diocese. But his behavior towards minors raised the attention of Davenport bishop Ralph L. Hayes when several YMCA representatives

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complained to the diocese that the priest had been repeatedly caught engaged in “a very improper activity” with several boys in 1956.¹ Janssen’s engagement in “homosexual tendencies” resulted in his removal from parish work in Clinton, Iowa.² At the time the Catholic Church generally conflated homosexuality with pedophilia and pederasty. As journalist Michael D’Antonio found, the Church interpreted pedophilia in their ranks not so much as a problem of abuse, but as “a problem of homosexual priests who preferred young partners.”³ The Bishop of Davenport instructed Janssen “to leave the Diocese immediately or just as soon as possible,” putting him on indefinite leave of absence.⁴

Janssen was a serial child abuser: over the past decades thirty-seven victims were identified. He mostly occupied positions in the Iowa church that allowed him extended contact to children, with little supervision. He worked at schools, at an orphanage, and with the Boy Scouts. He often groomed his victims through such activities as shoplifting together with them, which in turn made the boys less likely to speak out against the priest’s abuse. One of these shoplifting trips in 1956 eventually ended with Janssen’s arrest. This caused Bishop Hayes and other Iowa clergy to pay closer attention to the priest and his activities.⁵ The decision to send Janssen to another diocese came after

¹ George Alward, “YMCA Director Newton, IA Letter Re: Janssen,” November 2, 1956, Bishop Accountability, <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/ia-davenport/archives/jnw-ex-08-J-20.pdf>.

² Harley Holliday, “YMCA Secretary Newton, IA Letter Re: Janssen,” November 2, 1956, Bishop Accountability, <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/ia-davenport/archives/jnw-ex-08-J-18.pdf>.

³ Michael D’Antonio, *Mortal Sins: Sex, Crime, and the Era of Catholic Scandal*, 1st ed. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, StMartin’s Press, 2013), 25.

⁴ Ralph L. Hayes, Bishop of Davenport, “Bishop Letter to Janssen,” November 9, 1956, Bishop Accountability, <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/ia-davenport/archives/jnw-ex-08-J-20.pdf>.

⁵ “Janssen, James M., Assignment Record,” accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/ia-davenport/assignments/Janssen-James-M-Davenport-IA.htm>.

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other priests who had worked with Janssen approached the Bishop, urging him that “something should be done before the blow-up comes and the Church suffer.”⁶

Janssen spent his leave of absence at Loyola University Chicago, beginning in 1956. There he took up graduate studies – the field is unknown – and underwent psychological counseling. At that point he had already abused a sizable number of boys between the ages of five and thirteen, including his own nephew. Bishop Hayes’ reaction to the revelations that one of his priests engaged in crimes, was largely in line with the behavior of most Catholic bishops when they discovered clergy sexual abuse of children: he sent the offending priest away and ordered him to undergo therapy, counseling, and meditating on his behavior and missteps. Former President of the West Coast Chapter of the Franciscan Order, Joseph Chinnici, described this response as an elemental part of the clergy sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic church. The individual priests were one part, but another, no less crucial aspect was the culture of denial that anything fundamentally wrong was happening in the church. Chinnici calls this a crisis of the ecclesial culture of leadership. Church *and* religious order leaders failed to rise to the occasion and thereby enabled serial abusers to continue their behavior largely unchecked.⁷ Michael D’Antonio explains this with the fact that, at the time, laicization of a Roman Catholic priest was a long, complicated process, that would have opened the church to scandal. Bishops instead preferred to keep reports on these issues for themselves and instead transferred offending priests to other dioceses.⁸

⁶ MJD, “Letter to Bishop Hayes,” October 14, 1955, Bishop Accountability, <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/ia-davenport/archives/jnw-ex-06-J-34.pdf>.

⁷ Joseph P. Chinnici, *When Values Collide: The Catholic Church, Sexual Abuse, and the Challenges of Leadership* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2010), 9.

⁸ D’Antonio, *Mortal Sins*, 26.

At Loyola, Janssen underwent extensive psychotherapeutic counselling. Janssen's consulting psychologist, J. V. P. Stewart, revealed to Bishop Hayes that Janssen was not necessarily homosexual, but that he possessed a "disturbance in the sexual area," which Stewart attributed to the priest's childhood growing up without a father in his life and in a household where all talk about sex was taboo. Stewart also found Janssen "with considerable emotional immaturity." He recommended that Janssen should be assigned a spiritual director who could also serve as a replacement father figure.⁹ This assessment echoes Marie Keenan's findings of many abusive clergymen, namely that they were often psycho-sexually stunted. But Keenan came also to the conclusion that this stuntedness did not necessarily result in clinical pedophilia and serial abuse.¹⁰ Janssen, however, is the most prolific clerical child sexual abuser known to have had an affiliation with Loyola University Chicago.

During Janssen's time at Loyola University Chicago from 1956 to 1958, he also worked at the parochial school of St. Isaac Jogues in Hinsdale, Illinois, a western suburb of Chicago. There he worked with teenagers and boy scouts—and began to groom and engage in a sexually abusive relationship with a local altar boy. This relationship went on for over a year, during which Janssen graduated from Loyola. In 1958 he was re-assigned as substitute pastor to St. Michael's parish in Holbrook, Iowa. Stewart, the consulting psychologist at Loyola, inquired with Bishop Hayes at that time about Janssen, especially regarding his advice, that Janssen receive an assignment to a spiritual director who would serve as a substitute father figure. But Hayes replied that

⁹ J. V. P. Stewart, "Letter to Bishop Hayes," August 24, 1957, Bishop Accountability, <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/ia-davenport/archives/jnw-ex-13.pdf>.

¹⁰ Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 62.

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he had not assigned the priest a spiritual director, and also that Janssen had not followed any advice of the last pastor he worked with.¹¹ A short time later the mother of the abused altar boy found obscene letters that Janssen and her son were exchanging. She forwarded them to Bishop Hayes, who responded by suspending the priest. The bishop transferred him to the Abbey of Our Lady of New Melleray in Dubuque.¹² The letters between the boy and Janssen are available online through Bishop Accountability. The site has an extensive collection of evidence from the court cases against Janssen.

After Janssen's retirement and in the wake of the 2002 Boston cases, many of his former victims stepped forward, suing the priest along with the Davenport diocese in 2003. In the process of these legal actions a large amount of evidence was entered into the public record that revealed the extent of Janssen's abuses over the years. One former altar boy who at the time lived in Fort Madison, Iowa, described in detail the way that Janssen operated: the priest groomed a group of teenage boys, made them complicit in petty crimes, making himself the center of their in-group. He then turned to essentially pimping these boys out to a group of pedophile priests in the Davenport diocese.¹³ Janssen's superiors were aware that Janssen had serious problems, but they never went quite far enough in their actions towards the priest so that children were protected from him. Given the large number of victims present in Davenport, the diocese eventually filed for bankruptcy, after having to pay \$37 million to a stunning 157 survivors—not all

¹¹ Ralph L. Hayes, Bishop of Davenport, "Bishop Hayes letter to Stewart," August 24, 1957, Bishop Accountability, <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/ia-davenport/archives/jnw-ex-15-JJ-124.pdf>.

¹² "Janssen, James M., Assignment Record."

¹³ Unknown, "Douglas County Affidavit," December 15, 2003, Bishop Accountability, <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/ia-davenport/archives/jnw-ex-41-R.pdf>.

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of whom were victims of the Janssen.¹⁴ Janssen's victims received \$9 million in a settlement, and Janssen was sent to prison for six months. He was laicized in 2004 and passed away in 2015.¹⁵

¹⁴ Associated Press, "Davenport Diocese Reaches \$37 Million Settlement with Priest Abuse Victims, Associated Press, Carried in Courier, December 4, 2007," *The Courier*, December 4, 2007, https://www.bishop-accountability.org/news2007/11_12/2007_12_04_AP_DavenportDiocese.htm.

¹⁵ "Janssen, James M., Assignment Record."