

Grindr Faces Privacy Suit By Prominent 'Outed' Catholic Priest

By **Rae Ann Varona**

Law360 (July 18, 2024, 10:55 PM EDT) -- Gay dating app Grindr allegedly sold a prominent Catholic priest's sensitive personal information, causing him to lose his position as the general secretariat for the national conference of U.S. bishops, the priest alleged in a lawsuit seeking damages in California state court.

Jeffrey Burrill, a priest who resigned from his post at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in July 2021 amid allegations of sexual misconduct, said that despite assuring customers that it takes steps to protect personal data from unauthorized access, Grindr failed to do so with his.

Burrill, who said he was thereafter publicly "outed" and defamed through false claims, said that the company has continued to claim it respects user privacy despite public criticism, including by a former member of its top brass.

"To this date, despite the disturbing admissions by the former Chief Privacy Officer, other public proceedings, and in-depth reporting in the Wall Street Journal and elsewhere — all of which reveal a stunning pattern of Grindr's intentional and reckless failure to protect private data of its customers, including Burrill — Grindr continues to represent and falsely assure customers that 'We Care About Your Privacy,'" Burrill's complaint alleges.

Burrill said that he subscribed to the app in 2017 and that in connection with his subscription, Grindr collected "sensitive" customer personal data, including information about his sexual orientation and his physical location.

He said that sometime between 2017 and 2021, his personal data was purchased by a group called the Catholic Laity and Clergy for Renewal. The group's president, Jayd Henricks, had in March 2023 written in the religion journal, First Things, that publicly available data that was purchased and given to the group showed that some seminarians and some priests were using "hookup apps."

Burrill said in his complaint that his information was then sent to Catholic news site, The Pillar, which then in a July 2021 article revealed his sexual orientation without his consent and "smeared" him with "false and lurid claims."

Burrill said the article destroyed his reputation, forced him out of his position as the general secretary, and subjected him to "significant financial damages and emotional and psychological devastation."

Bishop William Callahan in the St. Teresa of Kolkata Parish, which covers the Beechview and Brookline neighborhoods of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, announced in June 2022 that Burrill was appointed as the parish's administrator.

Burrill's suit lodges claims for unfair, deceptive and unlawful business practices under California's Consumer Legal Remedies Act and Unfair Competition Law, as well as for fraud and deceit.

He alleges that Grindr deceived him by concealing that his sensitive personal information would be sold to third parties and that his information was, or could easily be, "de-anonymized." He alleges Grindr was aware of the risk as early as April 3, 2018, or possibly earlier, "but did nothing."

Burrill also alleges that Grindr falsely and misleadingly represented that users' personal information would not be sold to third parties since its nondisclosed advertising partners and other third parties "were at liberty to do just that."

"In short, Grindr places profits before its customers' privacy," Burrill says in his complaint.

Burrill's lawsuit is not the only privacy suit the West Hollywood-based dating app company — which touts itself as the "world's largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people" — has been hit with.

In April, a putative **class action** was launched in London over Grindr's alleged misuse of user HIV information, including the latest date they were tested.

Last year, its former Chief Privacy Officer **Ronald de Jesus** lodged a state court suit against Grindr in Los Angeles, alleging the company fired him for complaining to new leadership under then-new CEO George Arison about its user data collection practices. The company, he said, "placed profit over privacy."

According to the case's docket, de Jesus filed a request for dismissal in late May.

A Grindr spokesperson told Law360 on Friday that the company "intends to respond vigorously to these allegations, which are based on mischaracterizations of practices relating to user data from more than four years ago."

Greg Helmer of Helmer Friedman LLP on Friday pointed to de Jesus' lawsuit and told Law360 that de Jesus was "ringing the alarm bell as recently as 2023."

As for Burrill's suit, he said that Grindr subscribers like Burrill "have no idea that their sensitive personal information is being sold and-resold on opaque exchanges where the information is passed among shadowy third party players variously known as data brokers, information resellers, or data agents.

"Those players can do whatever they want with the information," Helmer said.

He said that the company "simply does not disclose to its users that their information will be made 'commercially available.'" If a subscriber's sensitive information is to be commercially available, he said that should be "highlighted in straightforward terminology and should not be concealed."

"What happened to Mr. Burrill is an abomination and it should serve as a stark warning to consumers and users of dating or other subscription services: Your information will be sold and will be made public," Helmer said.

Burrill is represented by Gregory D. Helmer and Andrew H. Friedman of Helmer Friedman LLP and James C.D. Carr of the Carr Law Group.

Counsel information for Grindr was not available as of Thursday afternoon.

The case is Jeffrey Burrill v. Grindr LLC et al., case number 24STCV17896, in the Superior Court of the State of California for the County of Los Angeles.

--Additional reporting by Eddie Beaver and Dorothy Atkins. Editing by Emily Kokoll.

Update: This story has been updated to add comments from Burrill's counsel and Grindr.