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# Indian priest in abuse case: 'I'm innocent'

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | Apr. 6, 2010

**WASHINGTON** -- An Indian priest who is accused of sexually molesting two teenage girls while working in Minnesota from 2004 to 2005 told UCA News, the Asian Catholic news agency, that he is innocent but he would return to the United States to stand trial if called to do so.

Father Joseph Palanivel Jeyapaul left Minnesota for a family emergency one year into what was to have been a three-year assignment in the Diocese of Crookston. Shortly after he left, allegations of sexual abuse arose, were investigated by the diocese and his permission to serve in the diocese was revoked. He has never returned.

A Roseau County, Minn., prosecutor confirmed to The Associated Press April 5 that she has been trying to extradite Father Jeyapaul from the Diocese of Ootacamund in southern India to face two counts of criminal sexual conduct stemming from allegations of sexual assault by a girl who was 14 and 15 at the time of the events. Apparently no charges have been filed related to the alleged incident involving the second girl, who was 16 at the time.

"I am innocent. There is no truth in these accusations. I am not guilty," Father Jeyapaul told UCAN April 6. "I was accused after I returned to India. I will go back and stand trial if called. I have nothing to fear."

At an April 5 press conference Jeff Anderson, a Minnesota attorney who has filed thousands of lawsuits against priests and representatives of the Catholic Church, produced letters between Bishop Victor H. Balke, then head of the Crookston Diocese, U.S. Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and other Vatican officials about the accusations against Father Jeyapaul.

Anderson said at the press conference in St. Paul that the letters were turned over by the Diocese of Crookston under court order as part of the discovery process for lawsuits.

In those letters, dated beginning in December 2005, Bishop Balke outlined the accusations against Father Jeyapaul, including that he allegedly sexually assaulted a 16-year-old girl while he was serving as administrator of Blessed Sacrament Parish in Greenbush, Minn. Bishop Balke, who retired in 2007, noted that there were other reports of similar behavior. He also said that Father Jeyapaul "misappropriated a substantial amount of money belonging to the parish, and also attempted to give a diocesan vehicle to a third party as payment for an outstanding debt."

Before the diocesan investigation into allegations against Father Jeyapaul began, the priest had returned to India to visit his dying mother, Bishop Balke's letter said. After the diocese's preliminary investigation, the bishop wrote, "I removed his faculties (which permitted him to minister in the diocese) and asked him to refrain from exercising any public ministry in my territory."

He said he also asked Father Jeyapaul to avoid contact with the alleged victim and requested that he return to Minnesota "so that he can be made accountable for his actions."

A response from Archbishop Angelo Amato, then secretary of the doctrinal congregation, dated May 2006, said that Father Jeyapaul's bishop in Ootacamund had been contacted "with the request that (his) priestly life be monitored so that he does not constitute a risk to minors and does not create scandal among the faithful."

In a later letter, Bishop Balke described a similar assault report made by a younger girl, who, like the first, had consulted with Father Jeyapaul because she was considering a vocation to religious life. It is the younger girl who is represented by Anderson and whose allegations are the basis of the criminal charges, according to Anderson's staff.

In that November 2006 letter, Bishop Balke told Cardinal Levada: "It is impossible to say that Father Jeyapaul does not at present pose some risk to minors." He said he had alerted the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops about his concerns "to prevent him from attempting to engage in public ministry in another diocese in this country."

"Given the most recent allegations, which are much more serious, I am afraid that a new investigation, and possibly a more severe penalty, is necessitated," Bishop Balke wrote. But because of the then-impending civil suit and because Father Jeyapaul was no longer under his jurisdiction, it "would appear pointless" to begin such an investigation in Crookston, he wrote. "And I am requesting that, due to the special circumstances of the case, your congregation investigate the matter itself."

Anderson, who has won tens of millions of dollars in settlements related to sexual abuse cases, posted those letters and other materials related to the case on his law firm's Web site.

Father Jeyapaul is currently serving on the Ootacamund Diocese's Commission for Education, where his work includes appointing and transferring teachers for diocesan schools and supervising infrastructure needs for schools, according to a letter from the priest to a friend, which was included in material posted by Anderson.

Bishop Arulappan Amalraj of Ootacamund told UCAN that his diocese had conducted a local inquiry after accusations were raised, quizzing all parishes where Father Jeyapaul had worked.

"We did not receive any complaint or allegations against the priest in local parishes," he said. "In fact, people said he had done a wonderful job."

Bishop Amalraj told UCAN he has consulted with the Vatican about the issue and would act according to the Holy See's instructions.

In a statement to AP, California attorney Jeffrey Lena, who represents the Vatican in an assortment of cases, said the Vatican has cooperated with Minnesota law enforcement authorities, providing Father Jeyapaul's address. He said the Vatican had also recommended he be laicized, or removed from the priesthood, because it believed the charges were serious enough, but that Bishop Amalraj had refused.

Lena also represents the Vatican in two lawsuits on appeal in different federal courts that seek to hold the Holy See liable for sexual abuse by priests. He did not respond to several attempts by Catholic News Service for comment.

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