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Canadian bishop on probation for porn charges

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Retired Bishop Raymond Lahey of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, arrives at a police station in Ottawa in 2009. (CNS/Reuters)

OTTAWA, Ontario -- Retired Bishop Raymond Lahey, convicted of importing child pornography, was released from prison Jan. 4 after the judge gave him double credit for eight months already served.

The judge also imposed a period of 24 months' probation with strict conditions on the 71-year-old former bishop of Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

After sentencing, a spectator in a blue plaid jacket began shouting obscenities at Bishop Lahey through the glass of the prisoner's box and called him a demon. Police rushed into the courtroom but did not charge the man, who said he was a victim of sexual abuse at the St. Joseph training school for boys in Alfred, Ontario.

Following a meeting with his probation officer and submission of a DNA sample for the National Sex Offender Registry, Bishop Lahey walked out of the Ottawa courthouse.

His probation conditions include reporting regularly to a probation officer; advising of any change of residence or travel outside Canada; cooperating in any advice to seek counseling and turning over any assessments to his probation officer; and staying away from swimming pools, schoolyards or places where children under 16 might be present.

He will be allowed to use computers and electronic devices, but the judge said he would be prohibited from using them to communicate with children 16 or under; he must never use them to view pornography or erotica; and he must consent to search of his personal and work computers at any time by peace officers.

The Vatican had no immediate comment. However, in May, a Vatican spokesman said the Holy See would "continue to follow the canonical procedures in effect for such cases," which could include dismissal from the clerical state. A lawyer for Bishop Lahey said he has written the Holy See asking for laicization.

As one of his lawyers ushered him through the gauntlet of cameras and microphones, the bishop looked tight-lipped and pale. He climbed into the front passenger seat of a sedan as cameras flashed and reporters shouted questions.

Earlier, Bishop Lahey's defense counsel, Michael Edelson, refused to say where the bishop would live. When asked whether Bishop Lahey would continue the 10-year homosexual relationship revealed to the court Dec. 19, Edelson said, "No comment."

Until Lahey opted to go to prison after his guilty plea last May, he had been living in a retired priests' residence in Ottawa. He moved into the residence to await trial not long after he was caught at the Ottawa airport in September 2009 with 588 child porn images, about 60 videos and fictional stories featuring sadomasochistic themes involving young boys on his laptop and other devices.

"Bishop Lahey is making his own arrangements for accommodation," said Sarah Du Broy, a spokeswoman for the Archdiocese of Ottawa. "He will not be staying in a residence or rectory of the Archdiocese of Ottawa. We do not know his plans."

Edelson said the bishop lost 30 pounds and developed a skin condition while in prison; most of his time was spent in solitary confinement. The lawyer also said the bishop had received many letters of support, from parishioners in Antigonish to highly placed Roman clerics.

At sentencing, the judge outlined the balancing of society's concerns for denunciation and deterrence of serious crimes with mitigating factors such as Bishop Lahey's career as a "distinguished spiritual leader and educator" while a Catholic priest and bishop. He noted that the bishop's use of child pornography was "confined to the privacy of his personal quarters in the absence of others."

He noted Bishop Lahey's apology for the harm he had done and admission that "what began as a careless curiosity blossomed into an obsessive addiction."

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