

Priest at center of Kansas City sex abuse cases expected to plead guilty

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Fr. Shawn Ratigan (Photo from the Clay County Detention Center)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- The priest whose arrest for possession of child pornography led to the first criminal charges against a Catholic bishop in the church's decades-long clergy sex abuse crisis is expected to plead guilty in federal court Thursday to at least some of the charges against him, according to court records.

Fr. Shawn Ratigan, a Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., diocesan priest whose May 2011 arrest raised questions about when his diocese and its bishop, Robert Finn, first became aware of concerns against him, is charged with 13 federal counts of possession and production of child pornography.

While Ratigan initially pleaded not guilty to the charges, a change of plea hearing for Thursday afternoon in federal court was entered into the court docket Wednesday morning.

Ratigan's case made national headlines in the fall when prosecutors in Jackson County, Mo., separately charged Finn and the Kansas City diocese with individual counts of failure to report suspected child abuse, which are criminal misdemeanors, regarding their oversight of the priest.

County prosecutors say both Finn and the diocese should have reported Ratigan to police as early as December 2010, when they acknowledge becoming aware of lewd images of children on his laptop.

Both Finn and the diocese have pleaded not guilty to the charges and are set for trial in September.

Jack Smith, the interim director of communications for the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese, said in a phone interview that the diocese first learned about Ratigan's apparent change in plea Wednesday.

In a statement released to the media Wednesday afternoon, the diocese said it "expresses its profound concern for anyone who may have been harmed by Shawn Ratigan and urges prayer for all affected by his actions."

Smith said Finn had not discussed the change with Ratigan.

Ratigan's apparent change in plea comes after federal prosecutors outlined some of the evidence they intended to use against the priest at trial, which they said [in a June 9 court filing](#) [1] would show Ratigan's motive in his

actions was "to indulge in and satisfy a sexual interest in female children."

Among the material prosecutors said they would introduce at trial is a list of images of alleged "child erotica" in Ratigan's possession, Web history that allegedly proves the priest accessed websites specializing in female child pornography, and Web searches that allegedly show he was researching "spy" pens.

In its statement, the Kansas City diocese also said it is "fundamentally committed to ensure that every report of sexual abuse, boundary violation or misconduct is addressed thoroughly and immediately."

The statement also points to Finn's appointment in June 2011 of a new diocesan ombudsman for reporting abuse, Jenifer Valenti, a former assistant prosecuting attorney in the Jackson County prosecutor's office.

Ratigan faces similar charges of possession and production of child pornography in a pending case in Clay County, Mo., where the parish he last served as pastor is based.

In a separate agreement with prosecutors [in that county in November](#) [2], prosecutors there suspended misdemeanor charges against Finn in the case so long as the bishop agreed to give the prosecutors immediate oversight of the diocese's sex abuse reporting procedures in their county.

As part of the agreement, Finn agreed to monthly meetings with Clay County prosecutor Daniel White to discuss all reported suspicions of abuse in the county, one of 27 the diocese spans in western and northwestern Missouri.

UPDATE: Following posting of this story, [The Associated Press reported](#) [3] Wednesday that Ratigan's public defender, Bob Kuchar, confirmed he was working on a plea for the priest.

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