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Former Kansas City pastor sentenced to 50 years in federal prison

by Catholic News Service

Kansas City, Mo. — A former Kansas City pastor was sentenced Thursday to 50 years in federal prison on child pornography charges.

In August 2012, Fr. Shawn Ratigan pleaded guilty to five counts of producing or attempting to produce child pornography. He received 10 years for each count and will serve his time in the Clay County Detention Center.

After the priest entered his guilty plea last year, the diocese filed a petition with the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that he be laicized.

In a statement about the priest's sentencing, Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City-St. Joseph said: "To victims of abuse, their families and the community at large, I renew my heartfelt apology and firm pledge to make our Catholic institutions second to none in the protection of children and the vulnerable."

"Much has already been done to strengthen a culture of protection in the local church since the arrest" of Ratigan in May 2011, the bishop said in a statement Thursday.

He outlined several steps the diocese has taken to address clergy sexual abuse, among them his appointment of former Jackson County Assistant Prosecutor Jenifer Valenti "to independently receive and investigate any and all suspicion of abuse, grooming behavior and boundary violations in our Catholic institutions."

"Under her direction, every single reported suspicion of abuse is immediately forwarded to law enforcement. All reported suspicion of abuse against minors is additionally referred to the Missouri

Children's Division," Finn said.

Among other actions, the diocese created an Office of Child and Youth Protection to implement and improve safe environment training programs and outreach services to victims; codified a new diocesan policy for response to abuse allegations, "with the mandate that all reports of abuse are referred to civil authorities"; developed new universal code of ethics for all diocesan personnel; and trained more than 1,000 diocesan leaders in mandatory reporting and "in recognizing child pornography, child obscenity, child erotica and grooming."

Diocesan authorities' failure to immediately report a computer technician's discovery of child pornography on a computer used by Ratigan, then pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Butler, led to Finn being charged with misdemeanors for failing to report suspected child abuse to state authorities. The diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph faced similar charges.

The child pornography was first discovered in December 2010. Authorities were not notified until six months later, when a search of the priest's family home turned up images of child pornography.

On Sept. 6, 2012, Finn was convicted of one count of failing to report suspected child abuse and acquitted on another count in a brief bench trial.

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Jackson County Circuit Judge John M. Torrence issued the verdict and sentenced the bishop to two years' probation. The charges carried a possible maximum sentence of one year in jail and a fine of up to \$1,000. Torrence dismissed the charges against the diocese after sentencing the bishop.

Finn is the highest ranking U.S. Catholic official to face criminal charges related to child sex abuse.

Several of the steps taken by the diocese to address abuse, including mandatory training of all staff and all clergy and putting in place reporting requirements, were among conditions Torrence set for Finn's probation.

"I am hopeful that these many proactive steps in promoting a culture of protection, awareness, investigation and immediate action on suspicions of abuse will help rebuild broken trust and make our local church a model for the protection of children and the vulnerable," the bishop said Thursday.

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