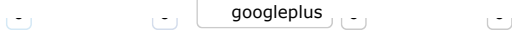


2 boys sue priest for sex abuse

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CEBU CITY — Finally, they summoned the courage.

Six months after they went public, during which time they claimed to have gotten no justice from the Catholic Church, two of three former altar boys of the Basilica del Santo Niño filed charges of sexual abuse against an Augustinian priest before the city prosecutor’s office here.

Michal Gatchalian and Jun Ryan Duhaylungsod, assisted by lawyer Paulino Labrado of the Children’s Legal Bureau, filed a complaint for acts of lasciviousness against Rev. Fr. Apolinario "Jing" Mejorada for alleged sexual abuses committed in the late 1990s when they were still minors.

The filing of the complaint came as a stinging rebuke to the findings of a team from the Cebu Archdiocese tasked by Ricardo Cardinal Vidal to investigate the complaint after the three former altar boys went public with their allegations last July.

The investigating team from the archdiocese released its findings only a few days ago but did not categorically say if the priest was guilty, saying only that he appeared so.

Also, it did not propose any sanctions, preferring to let that action be taken by the Augustinian order.

"Seeing no justice from within the church leadership, I have decided to seek justice from the regular courts, hoping that such bastardly (sic) acts of Fr. Jing would be given due course in accordance with law," Gatchalian stated in his affidavit.

In disclosing the findings of the investigating team, Vidal was quoted as saying: " Well, it is not in the sense that guilty as used in the court but there are some incidents that would tend to that. It is only after having reviewed the whole matter that we will decide what to do, together with the community of the Augustinians. "

‘Hoodlum’

In a six-page sworn statement, Gatchalian said he became an altar boy at the basilica in June 1995 and joined the Knights of Sto. Niño, an organization founded by Mejorada.

He actually got to meet the priest in the summer of 1997. Since then their friendship grew and he often accompanied the priest on out-of-town Masses.

Duhaylungsod said he met the priest in January 1998 when introduced by Gatchalian at the Pilgrim Center.

Both said the abuses started on Jan. 11, 1998 when the priest invited them for an evening joyride on his motorcycle. After cruising around, the priest took them to Ayala Center Cebu ostensibly to meet a nurse-friend.

At the mall, however, Mejorada told them his nurse-friend failed to arrive so he invited them instead to watch the movie "Hoodlum. " Once inside the theater, Mejorada allegedly insisted on being seated between the two boys.

Gatchalian, who remembered wearing shorts at the time, said he was surprised when the priest took his hand and held it, and then began massaging his thigh.

He said he tried to stop the caresses of the priest but was overpowered. Overcome with fear, he said he was eventually forced to feign sleep and leaned his body as far away as he could.

However, Mejorada allegedly pulled him back and massaged his thighs again until the priest's hands reached inside his underwear and began stroking his penis. His fear now replaced by shock, Gatchalian said he was immobilized and was unable to do anything except cover his face and cry.

Duhaylungsod said he was shocked to see what was going on. "I was so shocked in so much disbelief that a priest would do that to an altar boy. Michal pretended to be asleep by covering his face and his body bent away from Fr. Jing. I heard Michal sobbing. Then, consequently, Fr. Jing removed his left hand away from Michal's sex organ. "

Stricken with fear, Duhaylungsod also pretended to be asleep. But his ruse did not work as Fr. Jing eventually also allegedly turned his attention to him, snaking his hand toward his zipper to unzip it.

"I begged him not to do that, what he was doing, but he persisted so I cried and this apparently forced him to take his hand off me, " Duhaylungsod said.

Half an hour later, the priest wiped the tears off their faces with his handkerchief. But Duhaylungsod said the priest still continued to try and kiss Gatchalian.

Later the priest still managed to joke about whose private part was "better equipped," Duhaylungsod said.

Gatchalian said after the Sinulog that year, during a pilgrimage to Ozamis City, he learned that the priest also abused other altar boys but the priest asked for forgiveness and made a show of repentance. The boy's confidence returned and even became the priest's student in Spanish. The boys began to go with the priest in Masses outside the city again.

Then in September 1999, the priest invited them to his hometown of Loon, Bohol and there, after a swim, Gatchalian noticed that his bag was not in the room where he had placed it but inside the priest's room. There, the priest again allegedly made advances and asked him to do the same to him but he refused and walked out.

The following month, Gatchalian said he informed his spiritual director, Rev. Fr. Vicente Amplayo and his seminarian-brother who informed Rev. Fr. Romel Par.

Fr. Par in turn told their superior, Rev. Fr. Edgardo Lazo. But Gatchalian said he and the other victims were told they can no longer serve as altar boys so that on Oct. 24 he wrote a letter to Fr. Jing who agreed to talk to him the next day with his lawyer Paulino Yabao.

In that meeting, the priest allegedly admitted his wrongdoing and gave him P80,000 to pay for his school obligations since he lost his scholarship at the Center for Industrial Technology and Enterprise.

Gatchalian said he also demanded a public apology from Fr. Jing but got nothing. Then in December 1999, he discovered that the priest was no longer at the basilica and learned he was on retreat.

He also received appeals from Fr. Lazo to refrain from filing a case and that in exchange they will pay for his treatment and therapy.

Lazo also allegedly admitted that Fr. Jing's homosexuality is an open secret in the Augustinian community and that the priest is undergoing rehabilitation.

Again, months passed without a public apology so Gatchalian sought the assistance of Rev. Fr. Richard Pido, the Augustinian prior provincial, in April 2000.

Fr. Pido arranged a meeting among Fr. Jing, Gatchalian and another victim. They met the priest at the airport and managed to ask only for the payment of their tuition and written apologies plus counseling sessions.

A week later, they checked on the progress of their request but that the prior provincial instead berated them and branded them as "*mukhang pera*" (greedy for money).

In October 2000, assisted by lawyer Jorge Esparagoza, they decided to accept the offer of P120,000 each after being told that their case is difficult to pursue and file with the court. With them were the priest's lawyer, Arturo Fernan, Rev. Fr. Mario Mejorada, a brother of Fr. Jing, and an Atty. Sinajon and three other victims.

"We were persuaded to accept the money because our lawyers convinced us to just accept because it is very difficult to file and pursue a case in court."

Furthermore, we thought that since Fr. Jing had already been expelled from the Order and will be going to Africa, that would already be enough punishment, " he said.

After the negotiations, he said they signed a settlement agreement but that they have yet to receive a copy of the document. They were also verbally assured that they can serve again without discrimination and harassment at the basilica but experienced otherwise upon doing so.

In March 2002, he heard that Fr. Jing was readmitted to the Order and would be coming back. He said he attempted to confront the Augustinians but his efforts were always blocked. A friend then advised him to seek assistance at the Community Scouts Center.

On June 11, accompanied by Socrates Fernandez, he was introduced to a Pablita Toring who introduced him to Capt. Norma Corbo and lawyer Nina Valenzona who told him she will prepare his affidavit and blotter it with the police.

A week later, he returned to the office and was informed that the priest was brought to the Cebu City Police Office. However, when he asked for a copy of the blotter, he was refused and instead received a suggestion from Valenzona to write Vidal a letter.

In July he was told to undergo a psychiatric test which will be paid by the Order of Saint Augustine. At this he said he became suspicious and canceled the appointment. His suspicion proved true when he was told that Toring did not blotter the incident for legal complications as he already signed the settlement agreement.

He was then told that the psychiatric test will determine if the priest should apologize so that he wrote another letter to Vidal and sent it himself.

Vidal replied to assure him and the other victims that an investigation panel has been created.

When nothing came of it, they went public by talking to media. **Freeman News Service**

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