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COURTS ACT ON RAPE CHARGES AGAINST PRIESTS

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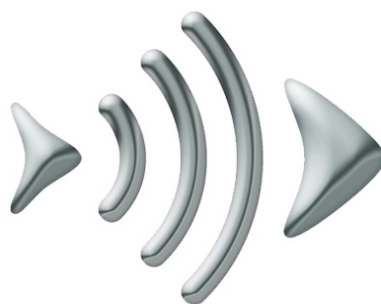
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A northern Philippine court has dismissed rape charges against a Columban priest, while a Department of Justice prosecutor in Manila has indicted another priest for allegedly raping a teenage girl in 1997.

Prosecutor Emmanuel Velasco banned Divine Word Father Macario Apuya from traveling abroad following his April 19 indictment, but he dropped charges against the priest's 81-year-old mother in connection with the alleged rape.

The girl filed charges against Father Apuya and his mother in October, claiming that the priest raped her in October 1997 in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, 330 kilometers northwest of Manila.

Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) staff helped the girl file charges after her Manila employer referred her to them.

Father Apuya told the Manila hearing that he invited the girl to the Vigan fiesta to keep his mother company, but he denied that he lured the

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girl into his room and raped her while his mother watched.

He submitted to the court a certificate from his cardiologist indicating that he underwent a quadruple heart bypass five months before the alleged rape and claimed that he was not fit for the physical exertion the girl described.

Archbishop Oscar Cruz of Lingayen-Dagupan said the archdiocese and the SVD northern Philippine province ran independent probes of the priest.

"I called Father Apuya, priests, nuns and laypeople who worked with him in the parish and at the Divine Word Academy to investigate the charges. Then I suggested for his sake that the priest ask his superiors for a change of assignment," Archbishop Cruz told UCA News April 21.

"If the charge is true, there can be no justification or excuse. If it is proven wrong, however, it has already caused a lot of anguish, hurt and embarrassment that cannot be repaired," Archbishop Cruz said.

Speaking by phone from San Fernando, La Union, SVD Northern Philippine Provincial Father Gaudencio Pugat told UCA News that the Society's investigation involved an SVD General Council member who was in the country at the time of the probe. "(Father Apuya) swore to us

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the charges were untrue and that he would prefer to stand trial to clear his name," Father Pugat said.

At the time of Father Apuya's preliminary hearing last October, Velasco said the case was the first in which a priest faced charges punishable by death through lethal injection since the death penalty was restored in 1994.

Meanwhile in Olongapo City, just southwest of Dagupan, public prosecutor Oscar Lasam dismissed rape charges against Father Shay Cullen, which the Irish priest claims was a pedophile ring's attempt to frame him in retaliation for child sex abuse charges he filed against a member.

"These foreign bar owners run establishments that are fronts for child prostitution in connivance with local politicians, and we are determined to close them down and save these sexually exploited children," Father Cullen said after the dismissal.

Father Cullen, director of the Prevention and Rehabilitation Center for Drug Abuse (PREDA), uncovered evidence linking retired U.S. military base employee Alan Dale Edmonds to the alleged sexual abuse of a girl PREDA had helped.

Edmonds filed countercharges against the priest, who has been protesting the abuse of women

and children and other social problems initially associated with the former U.S. naval base in Olongapo.

In his resolution Lasam concluded that "no probable cause exists against (Father Cullen)," citing the alleged victim's testimony naming her half brother and another man as having raped her 10 times.

"(Bar owners and pedophile ring operators) want to stop us, but there are many good people in the Department of Justice and the DSWD who have the courage to stand up for the truth and to help the children," the priest said.

At PREDA the alleged victim was under the care of professional therapists and social workers as some 43 sexually abused children are today. The center also conducts information campaigns on the rights of the child in towns and cities throughout central Luzon island.

PREDA also funds small cooperatives and livelihood projects and supports micro-lending initiatives to alleviate poverty and prevent child prostitution at the village level.

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