

Priest suspended on 20-year-old child abuse raps

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CEBU CITY, Philippines— Msgr. Cristobal Garcia has been suspended and stripped of his positions in the archdiocese of Cebu on orders of the Vatican while the Holy See investigates accusations he molested altar boys more than 20 years ago in the United States.

Msgr. Achilles Dakay, the archdiocese's media liaison officer, said Garcia's suspension came months before the priest was implicated by a National Geographic article in illegal trade of ivory in the Philippines.

Dakay said Garcia was suspended by Cebu Archbishop Jose Palma in June on instructions of the Vatican because of the ongoing investigation of the child abuse case filed against him.

As part of the penalties, Garcia is not allowed to say Mass in public and hear confessions and has been stripped of his positions in the archdiocese, including his chairmanship of the committee on worship.

Palma informed Garcia about his suspension, which might have affected his health, said Dakay.

Garcia, a diabetic and hypertensive, has been on sick leave. He was confined at a private hospital in Manila. Before that, he had been staying with a sibling in Manila while he sought medical treatment.

Palma confirmed at a news conference at the Archbishop's Palace on Wednesday morning that Garcia had been removed from his positions in the Archdiocese.

“You might notice you have not seen Monsignor Cris since June because he’s out of Cebu,” he said. “He is no longer connected with any of the posts he occupied before.”

He stressed that the investigation into Garcia’s child abuse case came long before the monsignor was embroiled in controversy involving ivory trade.

“In regard to the matter of Monsignor Garcia’s past, the case has been elevated to the Holy See and it has initiated the investigation into it long before the present controversy erupted,” Palma in a prepared statement.

“I have also fulfilled the Holy See’s instructions regarding the submission of documents and acting upon related consequences,” he added.

Garcia was a Dominican priest working in the Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles in the 1980s when he was accused of child abuse. He was later expelled after a nun reported to the police that an altar boy had been found in his bed in a Los Angeles rectory.

An article by the Los Angeles Times reported that Garcia was accused of molesting two youths in 1980 and 1984.

A Dallas Morning News item reported Garcia as saying he did have sex with the two altar boys but claimed that he was the one who was “seduced and raped.” His accusers, however, found his claims absurd.

Dakay told the Inquirer that Garcia was the last priest ordained by Cebu Archbishop Julio Cardinal Rosales before he died in 1980s.

When Garcia was expelled by the Dominican order, he added, Rosales brought him back to Cebu and took him as a diocesan priest.

But Dakay said Garcia could no longer go back to the US following a conviction in the civil aspect of the case. He could not say, however, if Garcia was ordered to pay damages.

It was during the time of Cebu Archbishop Ricardo Cardinal Vidal, Rosales’ successor, that Garcia was conferred the title of monsignor.

Garcia subsequently became a high-profile priest in Cebu and has been known for his vast collections of religious icons and paintings. His collections are usually displayed in exhibits every January as part of the festivities leading to the annual fiesta of Cebu’s patron, the Señor Sto. Niño.

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He was also given various positions, including the chairmanship of the Commission on Worship. He was also business manager of Bag-ong Lungsoranon, the official publication of the Cebu Archdiocese; and spiritual director of Bukas Loob ng Dios and the World Apostolate of Fatima.

He is also a founder of the Society of the Angels of Peace in Talisay City, Cebu, and rector of the Archdiocesan Shrine of Jesus Nazareno, also in Talisay.

Dakay said he thought that the child abuse case against Garcia had been considered closed until Palma was informed by the Vatican about the ongoing investigation.

"He must have repented and felt sorry for what he did because it was a sin. But the crime remained. Vatican went on investigating it," said Dakay. "What happened in the States could be a crime. If it was also a sin on his part, it was forgiven. It was repented for."

Dakay said the criminal case was elevated to the Vatican and is now the subject of an investigation.

Dakay said he didn't know when the case was revived. "I don't know why it reached the Vatican as a church case."

"We have been communicating with the Vatican. We didn't know that there was an investigation. We didn't know that it was revived," he said.

Dakay said Palma was appealing to the Vatican to soften the penalties apparently due to Garcia's health as well as his contributions to the Cebu Archdiocese.

Garcia left for Manila several weeks ago to seek medical treatment. He had been in and out of hospital because of his hypertension and heart ailment.

Dakay said some Cebu priests saw Garcia in Makati last week with his bodyguard and private nurse, "looking very sick.

"He is now in a hospital," he added.

He said Garcia, an expert in liturgy, has been printing their prayers. Garcia also founded a congregation and ran a shrine in Cebu.