

Church probes priest over molestation claims

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THE Archdiocese of Cebu will investigate claims that a priest molested a 17-year-old female choir member inside the parish convent in Aloguinsan town last December.

Pending results of the investigation, Fr. Prudencio Operiano will continue performing his duties as parish priest of St. Raphael the Archangel Church.

The church inquiry will be separate from one that may be conducted by the prosecutor's office if charges are filed against the priest, said Archdiocese spokesman Msgr. Joseph Tan.

Aloguinsan police said they will file a charge this week against Operiano for violation of Republic Act 7610, the Special Child Protection Law.

The teenage girl told police Operiano requested her to give him a massage inside his room on Christmas eve last year. He then allegedly touched her private parts.

"The Archdiocese will look into this serious allegation. Allegations of this kind cannot be ignored because the Church is accountable before God and the faithful that she professes to serve," Tan said over the phone.

Cebu Archbishop Jose Palma has instructed Msgr. Rey Penagunda, vicar general, to investigate the matter. The results will be forwarded to the Vatican.

"The mindset of the Church is first, to protect the alleged victims and second, to give the concerned priest just opportunity to answer the accusations," Tan said.

He said Msgr. Penagunda wanted to meet the parents of the girl to secure a straightforward narrative of what happened but they family has not yet responded.

Unless the priest is found liable for violating Church and civil laws, he said Operiano should not be condemned right away.

"He should be given the benefit of the doubt that hopefully the accusations leveled against him are not true," Tan said.

Operiano was ordained a priest of the archdiocese in 1990.

Last June 4, Cathy and her cousin reported to the Aloguinsan police what the priest allegedly did

to them last year.

They said they were at first reluctant to expose him but decided to complain, saying they could no longer bear his attitude.

The girl said Operiano first asked her to get some fruits from his car parked outside the church on Dec. 24, 2014.

When she opened the car, she said she was surprised to see him inside.

She said Operiano embraced her, kissed her, and asked her to go to his room.

She gave the priest a massage as he requested.

According to her, the priest touched her private parts and later gave her and her cousin P100, saying it was a Christmas gift.