

Public Safety

Three teens allege abuse by Catholic priest in D.C., court papers say

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A priest at one of the D.C. area's largest Latino parishes has been accused of sexually abusing three teenage girls in 2015, but the incidents were reported to law enforcement and high-ranking church officials just last month, even though two of the families alerted the parish around the time the incidents allegedly happened, authorities said.

The arrest of Urbano Vazquez, assistant pastor of the Shrine of the Sacred Heart in Northwest Washington, on a single count of second-degree child sexual abuse marked the first new claim of abuse in a parish of the Archdiocese of Washington in almost 20 years, according to church officials.

It comes in the midst of a sprawling clergy sexual abuse crisis in the U.S. Catholic Church that has primarily focused on allegations that leaders covered up such crimes or otherwise mishandled them, including not reporting them to law enforcement. Several high-ranking church officials, including Cardinal Donald Wuerl, the archbishop of Washington, have lost their positions over the issue this year, and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is to focus on it at its annual fall meeting next week.

In the Vazquez case, the main priest at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart, the Rev. Moises Villalta, has been removed, and the coordinator for child protection, Sonia Marlene Aquino, was placed on leave this week for failing to "follow appropriate protocols related to reporting claims," the archdiocese said in a letter Wednesday to its priests.

Vazquez, 46, did not enter a plea during his appearance in D.C. Superior Court on Thursday, but in 2015, he denied one girl's allegations, according to the affidavit. He could not be reached, and his public defender declined to comment on the case.

Villalta also could not be reached for comment Thursday. Aquino told The Washington Post that she reported allegations of abuse to a supervisor in 2015 and that her "conscience is in peace."

Vazquez has been charged in connection with the first of the three teenagers to accuse him of abuse.

D.C. police said they interviewed that teenager, who is now 17, on Oct. 29. She told detectives that the incident occurred in May 2015, when she and her family were at the church to sell food and snow cones for a picnic. Once those activities had finished, she said, she retreated to the rectory office to wait for her mother, who was

cleaning up. The teenager said she was playing on her iPod and sitting in a chair when the priest placed his hand on her chest and rubbed down from the shoulder, under her shirt and bra, court documents state.

Police said in the documents that the teen said the priest “kept his hand on her breast and ‘caressed it.’” She told police that she turned her chair away, forcing his hand out of her clothing. But, she told police, he repeated the action.

She said that the priest then left the office and that she “sat in the chair, stunned, until she finally walked into the bathroom and cried,” the arrest warrant says. She told a friend but did not immediately tell her mother, police said. Her mother said she later reported the incident to Villalta, according to the warrant.

The charge against Vazquez in that case was filed after the provincial priest who oversees the clergy at Sacred Heart from the Capuchin Order, to which Vazquez and Villalta belong, contacted the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency in October. The provincial priest reported that he had received a letter signed by the teenager’s mother regarding the allegations. It was unclear Thursday what prompted the allegations to surface again.

A second teenager told D.C. police that the priest abused her in May 2015 when she was 16, according to the arrest warrant. She said that one incident occurred in the rectory’s dining area while she and her mother were helping prepare food. The arrest warrant says the teenager said that after her mother left the room, the priest started talking to her and “out of nowhere kissed” her on her mouth.

The warrant says the girl’s mother returned and saw the kiss and confronted the priest, who apologized, saying he did “not know what came over him.” Police said the mother reported the incident to the church in September 2015 and in January 2016.

Police say the third teenager was 15 when she says she was abused in the rectory in May 2015. She told police she was in confession when the priest “placed his hand on her lower thigh.” The arrest warrant says the priest “rubbed her leg slightly” while she continued to speak with him.

Police and church officials said there are questions about whether the church properly handled the allegations.

The arrest warrant says the church’s head pastor told police that sometime around June 2015, the first girl’s mother and Vazquez approached him in a rectory hallway. The mother said that Vazquez had “touched or attempted to touch” her daughter but that the girl ran away. Vazquez denied the allegation.

The pastor told police that he offered to report the allegation to higher church authorities but that the mother did not want to do anything. The pastor said he told Aquino, the child protection coordinator, about the allegation and that the family was considering making a report. He told police he did not know whether that happened.

Some parishioners at Sacred Heart, which is in Columbia Heights and serves as a spiritual hub for the city’s sizable Salvadoran community, said Thursday that they were stunned by the charges against Vazquez and upset about the removal of Villalta. They described both as beloved in the parish.

Mary Anne Gibbon, who sits on the parish council and has belonged to Sacred Heart since 1980, said that the parish serves a largely low-income community and that Villalta is usually “busy as a beaver on roller skates” trying to help parishioners.

Gibbons described Villalta as “pastoral” and wondered whether he had truly shirked his responsibility to report the alleged abuse, especially since he and other Sacred Heart priests have held several recent meetings with parishioners to discuss the clergy sex abuse crisis and encouraged them to report abuse to the archdiocese.

Abel Nuñez, a leader in the local Central American community, said that in relation to Villalta, he was “withholding judgment until more information comes to light.” Nuñez said that Sacred Heart was one of the first parishes in the city to offer Mass in Spanish and that Villalta has advocated for immigrants locally and nationally.

Vazquez, who has been at Sacred Heart since 2014, is a member of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, a fellowship of priests, and was not ordained by the Archdiocese of Washington. The archdiocese grants some Capuchins permission to work in its churches, including Sacred Heart.

Chieko Noguchi, a spokeswoman for the archdiocese, said the Capuchins informed the archdiocese and police about the allegation involving Vazquez on Oct. 26. The archdiocese cannot discipline Vazquez because he is not one of its priests, but it immediately revoked his permission to work at the archdiocese’s churches. He has lost his position at Sacred Heart, Noguchi said.

Noguchi said the archdiocese did not inform parishioners at Sacred Heart until Wednesday to avoid disrupting the police investigation.

During the investigation, she said, the archdiocese learned that Villalta had known earlier about the allegation and had failed to report it. That is a violation of the archdiocese’s guidelines, and Villalta’s permission to work in the Archdiocese of Washington also was revoked, Noguchi said.

The letter to priests also mentions the child protection coordinator’s removal.

Archdiocesan policy requires “criminal background checks, applications and education for all employees and volunteers who work with young people,” and Vazquez cleared the background check and other requirements, the statement said.

Capuchins are a religious order known for vows of poverty and for working with immigrants and the poor. They wear simple brown habits. They are organized into regional groups, and the D.C. branch is headquartered in Pittsburgh.

The Archdiocese of Washington owns the Shrine of the Sacred Heart, but the parish and the school are run by the Capuchins. Priests who are part of orders would see their first allegiance to the order, and it is not unusual that the head pastor — as in this case — reported the abuse allegations first to the regional leader of the order, who then reported it to the archdiocese and civil authorities.

A man who answered the phone at the order's Pittsburgh office and identified himself only as "Father Frank" said the order was referring questions to the Archdiocese of Washington.


The parish also would not comment and referred questions to one of the remaining priests, the Rev. Kevin Thompson. Thompson did not immediately respond to an email Thursday.

According to an agreement between Vazquez's public defender and prosecutors, Vazquez will reside in Pennsylvania with his order and is not permitted into the District except for court-related meetings.

He is to have no contact with anyone under the age of 18 and is also required to surrender his passport.

Julie Zauzmer, Clarence Williams, Keith L. Alexander and Luz Lazo contributed to this report.

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