

Public Safety

D.C. judge orders Catholic priest to remain in jail after new abuse allegations

By [Keith L. Alexander](#)

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A D.C. judge on Thursday ordered a Catholic priest accused of sexually assaulting three parishioners to remain in jail until trial and said it was troubling that church leaders did not take action when complaints against the defendant were raised several years ago, possibly allowing additional incidents of alleged abuse.

Prosecutors said leaders at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart in Northwest Washington were initially notified in mid-June 2015 of allegations that Urbano Vazquez, an assistant pastor, may have sexually assaulted a teenage girl who was a member of the parish. Alleged assaults involving two other victims occurred between June 2016 and December 2017.

In a hearing before D.C. Superior Court Judge Juliet J. McKenna, Vazquez's attorney argued that his client should be allowed to return to the secluded parish outside of Pittsburgh where he had been staying, saying he would be watched by priests there as he awaited trial. But McKenna rejected the proposal as she questioned the church's supervision.

"He was in a position of trust and authority," the judge said of Vazquez. "I am troubled by the number of alleged victims over a number of years of alleged sexual abuse of young girls. And to release him now back in the supervision of colleagues who had been informed of such alleged behavior is troubling to me."

Vazquez, 46, was first arrested in November and accused of assaulting a parishioner in 2015, when she was a teen. He was freed pending trial. But he was arrested for the second time Tuesday and charged with assaults against two other parishioners.

Vazquez, wearing an orange D.C. jail jumpsuit, stood next to his attorney in court Thursday as prosecutors outlined the new charges against him. Authorities allege that over a course of a year, he several times kissed a girl on her lips, inappropriately touched her over her clothing and once tried to remove her stockings. The girl was 9 years old when the incidents began, authorities said. He is charged with second-degree child sexual assault in that case.

Prosecutors alleged that the priest also twice fondled a woman during a confession. He faces a misdemeanor sexual abuse charge in that case.

"Father Urbano hopes to respond to these allegations in a responsible manner as we investigate and seek to understand the bases of these allegations," Robert Bonsib, Vazquez's attorney, said in a statement Tuesday.

At Thursday's hearing, Assistant U.S. Attorney J. Matt Williams argued that, considering the number of alleged victims now linked to the priest, Vazquez should remain in jail.

While Vazquez faces charges involving three potential victims, authorities said three other people also made allegations against him. Williams said his office was unable to file charges against Vazquez in those cases because they occurred more than three years ago, which is outside the District's statute of limitations for misdemeanor sexual assaults.

Bonsib, in an effort to have his client freed pending trial, had asked a priest from the Pittsburgh church to outline in court Thursday how Vazquez was not allowed to leave the secluded parish on his own.

The accusations were "of grave concern for our ordinance," the Rev. Frank Yacobi said. "We are taking this extremely serious ourselves. It is in the wind in Rome and they are monitoring this case."

Williams said Vazquez became assistant pastor at the Sacred Heart parish in 2014.

The prosecutor said that in 2015, the mother of a 13-year-old girl who was allegedly abused by Vazquez reported the encounter to church officials. Williams said Vazquez remained in his position and continued to assault victims for at least two more years.

"The entire time he worked there, this defendant used his opportunistic behavior to exploit his victims when they were most vulnerable," Williams said. "The audacity and the conduct of this defendant are stunning. He should have been walking on eggshells. But instead he was empowered."

Following Vazquez's initial arrest, the main priest at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart, the Rev. Moises Villalta, was removed, and the coordinator for child protection, Sonia Marlene Aquino, was placed on leave for failing to "follow appropriate protocols related to reporting claims," the Archdiocese of Washington said in a letter to its priests at the time.

In a Tuesday letter to parishioners, the archdiocese reiterated its decision to take action regarding Villalta and Aquino. It said the archdiocese was "fully cooperating" in the investigation and encouraged anyone with information to contact D.C. police.

Vazquez's next court hearing is scheduled for Jan. 16.

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Keith L. Alexander covers crime and courts, specifically D.C. Superior Court cases, for The Washington Post. Alexander was part of the Pulitzer Prize-winning team that investigated fatal police shootings across the nation in 2015. He joined The Post in 2001. He previously worked as a reporter for USA Today, BusinessWeek and The Dayton Daily News. **Follow** 
