

Vatican orders priest to retire to life of penitence for abusing minors

SANTIAGO, Chile - The Vatican ordered an elderly priest in Chile to “retire to a life of prayer and penitence” for sexually abusing minors.

Archbishop Ricardo Ezzati Andrello of Concepcion announced the decision regarding Father Fernando Karadima, 80, Feb. 18 and said the priest would relocate from a Santiago parish to an undisclosed location so that he would have no contact with his former parishioners.

He said Father Karadima risked harsher penalties should he fail to heed the judgment.

The Vatican ruling, read by Archbishop Ezzati, said Father Karadima was subject to “lifelong prohibition from the public exercise of any ministerial act, particularly confession and the spiritual guidance of any category of persons.”

Following the announcement, two of Father Karadima’s victims called for a special prosecutor to reopen a criminal investigation.

Jose Andres Murillo and Juan Carlos Cruz said Feb. 21 that criminal proceedings should be brought against the priest and against anyone who “helped cover up these crimes.”

“Now there has to be a serious investigation into these criminal activities,” announced Juan Pablo Hermosilla, the victims’ attorney.

In an attempt to quash an appeal, Leonardo Battaglia, Father Karadima’s attorney,

petitioned an appeals court Feb. 22 to disallow any charges brought against his client, leaving a decision on the future of the case pending until Feb. 28 when the court reconvenes.

Meanwhile, Chile's Supreme Court President Milton Juica recommended that a special judge be appointed to investigate the priest if the case is reopened. The move ignited debate over what, if any, relevant materials the church would share with the court.

In announcing the Vatican's decision, Archbishop Ezzati said the church would not hand over records gathered during the church's investigation of the charismatic and influential priest in Santiago.

"I don't see why they can't be delivered," Juica said in response to Archbishop Ezzati's comments. "Any time a judge needs information, it should be placed at his disposal."

The Vatican's ruling brought a measure of relief to Father Karadima's accusers, however, Cruz and Murillo expressed frustration with the church's failure to respond when accusations first surfaced against the priest in May 2005. The ecclesiastical investigation of Karadima began five years later, in July 2010.

"There are a lot of people who are going to jump on the bandwagon now that the Vatican made its ruling," Cruz said. "Even though they did nothing at the time, they know who they are."

Father Karadima was accused by James Hamilton, a gastroenterologist, attorney Fernando Batlle Cruz, a journalist, and Murillo, a philosopher, of kissing and fondling them when they were teenagers. Father Karadima has maintained his innocence since the allegations surfaced.

“The truth didn’t perish, it triumphed,” Cruz wrote in a letter to his supporters that appeared on the website of the CIPER Chile news service. “Now, we must look ahead, let the truth follow its course and together create something better for those who have suffered so much and for those who come after us. This should never happen again, not only in our dear country, but anywhere in the world.”