News



Fr. Walter William Rozario is pictured March 12 outside Good Shepherd Cathedral in Rajshahi, Bangladesh. (CNS/courtesy ucanews.com)

by Catholic News Service

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The mysterious disappearance of a Bangladeshi priest just days before Pope Francis visited the country has taken a new turn, reported ucanews.com.

Police suspected that Fr. Walter William Rozario had been kidnapped by radical Muslims when they found his abandoned motorbike and discovered that his mobile phone was switched off. But ucanews.com reported their investigation revealed that the 41-year-old priest allegedly had been involved in a string of relationships with women and at least one girl under 18, the age of consent in Bangladesh.

"From our interrogation and findings, I can confirm that five women and an underage girl had illicit and physical relationships with the priest. One of those who admitted having an illicit affair with the priest was a girl aged 17 who was studying in college," Inspector Saikat Hasan of Boraigram police told ucanews.com.

Rozario, then assistant parish priest at Maria Virgo Potens Church and acting headmaster of church-run St. Louis High School in Borni, was involved in preparatory work for the pope's visit when he went missing Nov. 27. Police found the priest in Sylhet, about 250 miles away, Dec. 1 after he reportedly escaped from his abductors and called his brother for help.

But the next day Natore's police chief told a press briefing that Rozario had not been abducted but had sought to be on his own to escape psychological distress.

During four days of searching for the priest, Boraigram police questioned about 20 people, including 11 women and several underage girls, based on information they found on two laptops and several SIM cards retrieved from the priest's rooms.

Later, when they questioned Rozario, they found he had embezzled funds from the school to buy the silence of women with whom he had allegedly had improper relationships.

During interrogation, the priest admitted that no one kidnapped him, but he claimed he went into hiding due to psychological trauma he was suffering from an alleged blackmail attempt, according to a statement recorded on Dec. 3 by the police and seen by ucanews.com.

Hasan, the police inspector, said the priest admitted having physical relationships with four females, including one with Anita Roy, 28, that started within months of his

ordination on Dec. 31, 2008.

"Recently, Roy said she believed the priest was cheating on her, so she also tried to cheat on him too. The priest was afraid and so gave Anita Roy 200,000 taka (US$2,350) last year," Hasan said.

"Half of the money came from the funds of the school where he was the headmaster, and the rest he took as a loan from the bishop's fund. It seems the priest wanted to keep her (Roy's) mouth shut about the relationship. It was the main reason behind the priest's disappearance."

Police said phone records of a 15-year-old girl showed evidence that the priest sent her "lascivious texts" including "I love you" several times.

"That girl didn't admit having a physical relationship with the priest, but she admitted the priest kissed her on the lips one day," Hasan said.

Rozario now denies what police say he admitted but appears reticent to challenge "the truth established by the situation."

"I don't want to challenge it or elaborate on it. It might create further problems for me. I have come out of a bad situation and don't want to look back on it. I only want to start over again with my priestly ministries," he said.

Rozario said he would soon refund the money he took from school funds.

Speaking to ucanews.com May 26, he claimed he disappeared last year due to depression, but he denied having physical relationships with women and underage girls.

"When police quizzed me, I was in a psychological trauma. I was forced to say many things under pressure. I can admit having intimate relationships with them, but I didn't have physical relationships with anyone," Rozario said.

"I didn't violate the vow of celibacy in my priestly life."

Ucanews.com talked to female students under age 18 who spoke of being touched inappropriately. The agency said police would not publicly name the underage girl who allegedly admitted having sexual relations with the priest and, after initially agreeing to an interview with ucanews.com, she did not meet at the agreed time and became unreachable.

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Rozario declined to answer whether he kissed or sent pornographic mobile messages to the 15-year-old girl. He also denied having a physical relationship with Roy but said he gave her money in 2017 after she blackmailed him by threatening to release naked pictures of him online.

"In the digital age, it is possible to create fake images. Had she released what she claimed to possess, my priestly life could have been in danger. I wanted to stop her by giving her money," the priest said.

After he was traced by police in December, Rozario stayed at the house of Bishop Gervas Rozario of Rajshahi for several months.

The bishop formed a committee to investigate, but its findings have not been made public.

Rozario has not returned to Borni since December.

In February, he was appointed assistant parish priest of Good Shepherd Cathedral Church of Rajshahi. At the end of April, he was sent even further afield to Ave Maria Catholic Church in Gulta, to serve as acting pastor for two months. His previous position as acting headmaster of St. Louis High School has not been revoked.

Rozario, vice president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh, told ucanews.com that he has a "responsibility to justice and doing the right thing for everyone concerned."

"I was waiting to see if police could find anything that will go against the law of the country. They apparently did not find anything to hook him down," he said.

"Then I asked the parish priest to do an investigation, but he too did not find anything grave enough to ask Father Rozario to step down. But he found several cases of imprudent behavior.

"I also talked to him several times, but he denied breaking his vow of celibacy."

Hasan said police cannot charge Rozario unless a victim or family member makes an official complaint.

Rosaline Costa, a Catholic rights activist, former nun and former executive director of Hotline Human Rights Trust in Bangladesh, said cases of priests acting immorally are common in largely impoverished Bangladesh, where many Catholics are poorly educated and in fear of the church. She said underage girls are often silenced by the perpetrators with rewards, including money and foreign trips, noting that it is mainly girls from poor families who tend to fall prey to clergymen.

"I know a foreign priest who used to support the education of poor girls and set up their marriages. That clergyman demanded the bodies of very needy girls," Costa said.

Bangladeshi law provides that a person found guilty of abusing minors can face between 10 years to life imprisonment under the Women and Child Repression Prevention Act 2000, said advocate Nina Goswami, deputy director of Ain-O-Salish Kendra, a Dhaka-based rights group.

There is no legal provision for punishment for covering up an abuse case, but the courts can deliver any sentence depending on levels of complicity, she told ucanews.com.