News



An undated mugshot of Manuel La Rosa-Lopez. (RNS/ Montgomery County Sheriff's Office)

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The latest chapter in the child sex abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church played out Nov. 28 as police searched offices of the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese in connection with an investigation into a local priest.

A news release from the Montgomery County District Attorney's Office said the search was conducted using a search warrant and was part of a joint law enforcement investigation of Fr. Manuel La Rosa-Lopez, who was arrested in September and is facing charges of at least two counts of indecency with a child. The alleged incidents, which La Rosa-Lopez denies, took place between 1998 and 2000.

"The primary purpose of this law enforcement search warrant today is to gather documents, records, electronics, and other evidence in the investigation of LaRosa-Lopez," the news release said. The release noted the investigation also executed search warrants for two Catholic churches in the area in September, as well as a treatment center.

Montgomery County District Attorney Brett Ligon said the search involved federal agencies as well as Texas Rangers and was narrowly focused on the allegations against La Rosa-Lopez.

"This is not a search warrant of the Catholic Church, nor is it [of] its employees," Ligon, who is Catholic, said at a news conference conducted during the search. He added that he spoke with the archdiocese's head, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, who also leads the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, but the cleric was not aware of the warrant ahead of time.

"The state of Texas is not required to go through the Catholic Church" to conduct its investigation, Ligon said.

He noted that he was married at one of the churches searched earlier this year. But he said officials will follow the evidence, wherever it leads.

"If it led me to Rome, we'd be at the Vatican today," he said.

The archdiocese also issued a statement, saying it "continues to cooperate" with the probe and that "consistent with Cardinal DiNardo's pledge of full cooperation, the

information being sought was already being compiled."

The search is the latest development in the abuse crisis rocking the Catholic Church. A wave of state and federal investigations into Catholic dioceses was sparked in August by a bombshell grand jury report released by the Pennsylvania attorney general on abuse within the church in that state.

Ligon suggested to reporters that his investigation of La Rosa-Lopez has been informed by the Pennsylvania report, which alleged widespread sexual abuse of more than 1,000 children by hundreds of Catholic priests there over 70 years.

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"The Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office has been very helpful in helping us structure what we're looking for," Ligon said.

DiNardo, who met with Pope Francis this year about the ongoing abuse crisis, is facing allegations of not having done enough to stop La Rosa-Lopez's alleged abuse. One person told The Associated Press in September of approaching DiNardo about the priest's alleged abuse and being told that La Rosa-Lopez would be removed from any contact with children. The person later discovered La Rosa-Lopez remained in ministry at another parish 70 miles away.

Earlier this month, DiNardo expressed frustration that the Vatican had called for a delay on efforts by bishops to vote on resolutions designed to hold bishops accountable for mishandling abuse or for committing abuse themselves. DiNardo is expected to attend a global meeting on the issue in Rome in February.

Authorities told Religion News Service that the La Rosa-Lopez investigation remains centered on the priest but they wouldn't rule out a potential expansion if investigators come across new evidence.

"[The investigation] focuses on LaRosa Lopez – however, we will continue to look into any cover-up or other criminal conduct of anyone involved in this incident," J. Tyler Dunman, assistant district attorney of Montgomery County, said in an email.

La Rosa-Lopez's next scheduled court date is Jan. 10.