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After accusations of sex abuse, the Vatican has laicized American Richard Daschbach, a former Divine Word missionary who ran orphanages in East Timor for 27 years.

Accusations surfaced early in 2018 that Daschbach, who arrived in the country in 1966, had been sexually abusing young girls who were in his care in the enclave of Oecusse, which sits separate of the rest of East Timor and is surrounded by Indonesian territory.

The case is now under investigation by local police.

Fr. Jovito Rego de Jesus Araujo, episcopal vicar for pastoral care in the Diocese of Dili, told Catholic News Service that this is the first time a case of sexual abuse of minors by a member of the Catholic clergy has come to light in East Timor.

Divine Word Fr. Yohanes Suban Gapun, the order's Dili-based regional superior, told Tempotimor.com: "In the orphanage of Kutet, girls were allegedly sexually abused by Daschbach."

The two orphanages in Oecusse are currently home to about 120 children, and hundreds more have passed through their doors over the years.

Gapun said that in early 2018, the Vatican received the accusations. In March, the order sent Gapun to Oecusse to return Daschbach to Dili.

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The former priest resisted for several days, Gapun said. He was suspended and forbidden to perform his priestly celebrations while the order conducted its investigation on behalf of the Vatican. The police were informed shortly afterward.

"We never expected this from a man who dedicates himself to the people. He is like the father of that community, which he built, nourished and supported with all kind of help. This is a real disaster, a drama. A very dramatic situation. An old man of 82 years being accused of pedophilia," Araujo said.

Catholic News Service attempted, unsuccessfully, to contacted Daschbach by phone.

With criminal investigations underway, potential victims and witnesses and their identities are protected by the law, and they are discouraged by authorities from speaking to the media.

The Nabilan Health and Life Experiences Study, an academic study into abuse of women and children in East Timor conducted in 2015 by The Asia Foundation, found that "approximately 3 in 4 women and men surveyed (72 percent of all women and 77-78 percent of men) reported that they experienced some form of physical or sexual abuse as a child."