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A Capuchin Franciscan priest was found guilty Aug. 15 of four counts of child sexual abuse stemming from when he served as a parochial vicar at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart in Washington.

Fr. Urbano Vazquez, who served at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart from 2014 until his November 2018 arrest, was found guilty in D.C. Superior Court on three felony counts of second-degree child sexual assault with aggravating circumstances, and on one misdemeanor count of sexual abuse of a child.

The verdicts came after an eight-day trial and two days of jury deliberation. Vazquez, 46, will be sentenced in November and faces a maximum sentence of up to 45 years in prison.

"The archdiocese respects the decision of the jury's finding that Vazquez is guilty of the charges brought against him and will continue to support the legal system through the sentencing process and any subsequent proceedings," the Archdiocese of Washington said in an Aug. 15 statement after the verdicts were announced. "Fr. Vazquez will have no authority to serve as a priest in the Archdiocese of

Washington."

Vazquez was arrested last November on charges of second-degree sexual child abuse, and was arrested again in December and charged with abusing two others, including a minor. Also in December, D.C. Superior Court Judge Juliet McKenna ordered Vazquez to remain in jail until his trial.

"The archdiocese has fully cooperated with law enforcement and civil authorities in their investigation" of Vazquez, the archdiocesan statement noted.

Last March, Vazquez was offered a plea deal, but he turned that down and opted for a jury trial instead. He has maintained his innocence since the accusations first surfaced.

With his first arrest, Vazquez was charged with second-degree child sexual abuse involving a 13-year-old girl in 2015. Later, when new allegations surfaced, he was charged with two additional counts -- second-degree sexual assault of a minor female and assault of an adult woman -- that occurred in 2016.

In a November statement issued after Vazquez's initial arrest, the Archdiocese of Washington said "immediately upon learning of this serious allegation, the archdiocese immediately removed Vazquez from ministry and suspended his priestly faculties."

All the victims were members of the Shrine of the Sacred Heart, a parish that serves a predominately Spanish-speaking Catholic community.

"The archdiocese will continue to work with the Sacred Heart parish and school leadership to ensure that this community is supported and that the survivors who came forward to report the allegations are provided emotional and pastoral care through this difficult time as they continue in their process of healing," the archdiocese said in its Aug. 15 statement.

After Vazquez's initial arrest, the Archdiocese of Washington conducted its own investigation into what it called "this troubling matter" and determined that Capuchin Franciscan Fr. Moises Villalta, pastor of Sacred Heart, "failed to follow appropriate protocols related to reporting allegations of abuse to civil authorities and the Archdiocese of Washington." The archdiocese subsequently removed Villalta as pastor and placed the parish's child protection coordinator on administrative

leave.

Vazquez still faces misdemeanor sex abuse charges stemming from another woman's accusation the priest groped her during confession. In addition, two other misdemeanor allegations were made against Vazquez, but they could not be prosecuted because the statute of limitations had expired.

"The Archdiocese of Washington is steadfastly committed to the protection of youth and the healing of those harmed by abuse and adheres to a zero-tolerance policy for credible claims of abuse made against archdiocesan clergy, religious orders operating in the archdiocese, staff and volunteers," the archdiocesan statement said.

"The Archdiocese of Washington takes seriously its responsibility to protect the children entrusted to its care and the archdiocese's Child Protection and Safe Environment Policy mandates criminal background checks, applications and education for all employees and volunteers who work with young people," it said.

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