News



The Cathedral of St. Joseph and St. Philomena in the Diocese of Mysore, India (Dreamstime/Sushanth K)



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Bombay Cardinal Oswald Gracias, one of Pope Francis' closest advisers, is strongly denying reports that he sought to intervene in the case of an Indian bishop accused of secretly fathering a child.

In a video posted online Aug. 7, Gracias rebutted allegations he had arranged for Bishop Kannikadass William Antony of the Mysore Diocese in southwestern India to take a paternity test at a Catholic hospital in order to control the outcome of the test results.

Gracias said an audio clip from a two-year-old conversation with Antony, which has attracted attention among Indian Catholics in recent weeks, had been "mischievously edited to give the impression that there was collusion between Bishop William and myself for a cover-up."

In the clip of the leaked phone call, which was promoted by the right-wing website Church Militant, Gracias could apparently be heard telling Antony that Gracias would arrange for the paternity test to be conducted at a Catholic hospital "so we can control the media, control the doctors, control the publicity given to the whole thing."



In a video posted online Aug. 7, Bombay Cardinal Oswald Gracias rebuts allegations sought to intervene in the case of Bishop Kannikadass William Antony. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/Archdiocese of Bombay)

However, in his statement on Aug. 7, Gracias said he "categorically, emphatically and totally" denied that he had said or suggested that they could control the outcome of the test.

"At no time in the conversation or otherwise have I suggested any action that would be illegal or bring disrepute to the church," said the cardinal, who has led the Bombay Archdiocese since 2006 and has served as a member of Francis' influential Council of Cardinals since the group's creation in 2013.

In response to an inquiry from NCR, the Bombay Archdiocese has made available an unedited version of the recording of the phone call between Gracias and Antony. In the fuller version of the conversation, which lasts about 15 minutes, Gracias presses Antony several times to take a paternity test.

The cardinal also tells Antony on the recording that should the bishop come out "completely clear" from the test, "we can then publicize and you will come out like a hero and a martyr ... who suffered something unfairly."

In his Aug. 7 statement, the cardinal said the unedited version of the recording shows that he suggested a specific Catholic hospital because "it is an institution of credibility."

"I did have a conversation with Bishop William in August 2020," said the cardinal. "During that conversation I urged Bishop William that it would be advisable for him to do a paternity test. I impressed on him that several people I know had been disturbed with the rumors going around. This was not good for the church and the best way to end the controversy was this test. I said so then two years back and I still think so."

It is unclear if Antony has ever taken the paternity test.

To allay Antony's fears of publicity, Gracias said he had assured Antony that the hospital "could have the requisite controls in place to ensure that there will not be any media leakage or manipulation."



Bishop Kannikadass William Antony of Mysore, India, gives a Christmas message in a video posted Dec. 25, 2021. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/Mysore Diocese)

Antony has been accused by some of his own priests of fathering a child and of intimidating a survivor of sexual harassment. A Vatican investigation of him is ongoing.

The three-member commission leading the Vatican investigation is headed by Archbishop Leo Cornelio of Bhopal. The commission has been examining evidence against Antony since March 2021. It was set up after 37 priests from Antony's diocese wrote to Francis in July 2019 demanding that Antony resign and alleging Antony had fathered a child.

Antony has denied the allegations and suggested that a group of priests opposed to his administrative reforms in Mysore are behind the allegations. In May 2020, Antony announced the 37 priest complainants were being transferred out of their parishes and other priestly assignments.

Some in Antony's diocese have organized a group called the "Save Mysore Diocese Action Committee," which has written to Vatican officials several times about the case against the bishop.

This July, the group sent a letter to Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, the papal nuncio to India; Cardinal Luis Tagle, head of the Vatican's evangelization office; and Gracias. The letter called for Antony to be "immediately divested of all powers to operate diocesan accounts." It also referred to a reported August 2020 order from Tagle that Antony take a paternity test.

A former high-ranking Indian justice office has also gotten involved in the case. Michael Francis Saldanha, a former justice of the Bombay High Court, in an Aug. 1 letter called for both Gracias and Antony to step down from their positions. Saldanha said any paternity test should be conducted by Indian health authorities.

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"The Supreme Court has very clearly mandated that there is only one authority i.e. the National Forensic Institute at Hyderabad which is designated to conduct paternity tests and there are fool proof guidelines regarding the drawing of the samples from the father and the offspring which has to be done under Court and Police supervision as otherwise, the test becomes meaningless," Saldanha wrote.

Tagle, who leads the Vatican office responsible for the Indian church, did not immediately respond to an NCR request for comment about Antony's case. Antony has not responded to a request for comment.

Vincent Doyle, founder of Coping International, a support group for the children of Catholic priests, told NCR that he has been unable to obtain information about the source of the alleged audio of Gracias and Antony's conversation. The sources for the audio, he said, remain "unnamed and without a face."

Doyle said he was concerned about how the publicity of the case may be affecting the child at the center of the controversy.

"The alleged child of the bishop ... has been used as a 'battering ram' to remove from office both bishops," said Doyle. "Using a child for an adult-centered end is categorically what Coping is against."