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An Alabama priest disgraced after abandoning his parish to travel to Italy with an 18-year-old woman described himself as "married" to her in a Valentine's Day letter.

"I love you, and I thank Jesus for you every day. You have made my life both astronomically more complicated and incredibly better at the same time. You are his gift to me," Fr. Alex Crow wrote in a letter recently released by the Mobile County Sheriff's Office. "Now, we are in love and we are married! I've never been in love before (and I've never been married, obviously!), and I've never felt any of the feelings I have for you for anyone ever in my entire life. I promise that I will love you the absolute best I can, every single day."

Fr. Alex Crow, former parochial vicar at Corpus Christi Parish in Mobile, Ala., is pictured in an

Fr. Alex Crow, former parochial vicar at Corpus Christi Parish in Mobile, Ala., is pictured in an undated photo. (OSV News photo/courtesy Archdiocese of Mobile)

The handwritten letter to the 2023 high school graduate indicates that the priest planned for the couple to be in Italy together "with our family" and have "many

wonderful and normal Valentine's Days."

Crow, 30, and the unnamed woman are believed to have left Mobile unannounced July 24. Crow had been a parochial vicar at Corpus Christi Parish in Mobile and left behind a letter to the Archdiocese of Mobile stating that he would never return to the United States, according to the sheriff's office.

In a separate letter released by the sheriff's office from Crow to a person named Joshua, identified by the sheriff's office as Crow's brother, the priest indicated that by leaving he believed that he was following "Jesus' will," and that he believed Jesus had told him to leave and not return. He also said he was not leaving the priesthood, and that the young woman "has been told to come with me."

"We know how this looks, but we are doing what we are told," Crow wrote to his brother. "Do not worry about defending us. This is hard for her too, but she knows she will always be safe if she does Jesus' Will. We will always be thinking and praying for all of you, especially our families and friends. Please pray for us, too. We need it."

Following the letters' publication, the Mobile Archdiocese said in an Aug. 14 statement that it "joins those who are troubled and concerned about the recent behavior of Alex Crow."

The sheriff's office has been investigating whether a crime has occurred. It said July 29 that a relative of the woman, later identified as an uncle, had located the couple in Italy. A spokesperson told OSV News that the uncle reported that the woman had "left on her own accord" and "the family member … did not seem alarmed." The sheriff's office has not released the identity of the woman.

On July 26, the Mobile Archdiocese issued a statement announcing that Crow, who was ordained in 2021, had "abandoned his assignment in the diocese" and exhibited behavior "totally unbecoming of a priest."

According to the statement, Mobile Archbishop Thomas Rodi told Crow that "he may no longer exercise ministry as a priest, nor to tell people he is a priest, nor to dress as a priest."

The archdiocese also said that "due to the circumstances of his departure," it had reported the situation to the Mobile County District Attorney's Office, which opened the investigation.

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The young woman is a 2023 graduate of McGill-Toolen Catholic High School in Mobile. Crow also attended the school from 2007-2011. After his ordination, he visited theology classrooms and heard confessions between September and December 2021, and also celebrated a school Mass that year, according to a Facebook post from school leaders.

Initial reports included speculation that the young woman and Crow, who had spoken to McGill-Toolen students about demonology, had traveled to Spain for an exorcism.

The Valentine's Day letter suggests that the priest developed a close relationship with the woman that turned romantic. "Before we fell in love, I promised to always care for you and protect you, like a father," he wrote. "I still look at you and see a child, but in the best way imaginable. You are mine -- no one else's, and I will always be a father to you until I die."

He apologized for not being able to give her "a 'normal' Valentine's Day this year." "I wanted to do nothing more than buy you flowers but for fear of scandal I couldn't," he wrote. "I almost stole some from the Mary statue but there were too many people around."

Lori Myles, public affairs director for the Mobile County Sheriff's Office, told OSV News Aug. 16 that there are currently no criminal charges against Crow, but the office is investigating the nature of the relationship and whether the woman has been manipulated or coerced. The office also is clarifying the nature of Crow's involvement at the high school and whether he violated an Alabama law prohibiting a school employee from engaging in sexual acts with a student under age 19, she said.

"We are just continuing to investigate the timeline -- when this relationship began and how much of a relationship it truly is, and if she is OK where she is," said Myles, noting that the young woman's "parents want her home." She said her office is "still interviewing former (McGill-Toolen) students and still asking if anybody has any information to come forward and contact the Mobile County Sheriff's Office at 251-574-8633."

The sheriff's office does not suspect physical abuse, Myles said. "We think she is physically well," she said. "But clearly, if he (Crow) has groomed her and done the things that fit (a groomer's) profile, her mental state may be somewhat brainwashed. We just don't know."

Myles said that the woman's parents have traveled to Italy to locate their daughter. She could not confirm where the couple is in Italy.

She noted that if charges are brought against Crow, then international agencies such as Interpol would become involved in efforts to extradite him to the U.S.

In a statement, the district attorney's office said that it is not its policy to "share information that could jeopardize an active investigation." "We have a duty to the citizens of Mobile County to uphold the integrity of our investigations and that will always be our policy. With that said, we are learning more information regarding this case by the day and this case has our full attention," it said in a statement shared Aug. 16 with OSV News.

In its Aug. 14 statement, the Mobile Archdiocese said that it "has and will continue to cooperate fully with all requests for information from law enforcement."