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Vatican lawyer's statement on Indian priest

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NCR Today

In the latest case to raise questions about the Vatican's handling of the sex abuse crisis, attorneys today released church correspondence involving Fr. Joseph Palanivel Jeyapaul, an Indian priest charged with sexually assaulting a 14-year-old girl in a Minnesota parish in 2004.

When those accusations first emerged in 2005, Jeyapaul returned to India, where he is still serving as a priest in a bureaucratic role for his local bishop. Informed of the case by Bishop Victor Balke of the Crookston, Minn., diocese, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sent a letter instructing Jeyapaul's bishop in India to look into it in early 2006.

The lawyers representing the young woman are demanding that Jeyapaul be returned to the United States for prosecution.

This afternoon, an attorney who represents the Vatican in American litigation, Jeffrey Lena, released a statement about the Jeyapaul case. In effect, Lena makes two points:

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith recommended expelling Jeyapaul from the priesthood, but his bishop in India decided simply to restrict his ministry following a church trial.

When officials in Minnesota decided to seek Jeyapaul's extradition, the Vatican promptly complied with requests to disclose his exact location.

The following is the full text of Lena's statement.

Statement from Jeffrey Lena on the Jeyapaul Case

The decision regarding the canonical penalties imposed upon Father Jeyapaul was made by the Bishop of

Ootacamund, whose diocese is located in the Nilgiris district of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith suggested in this matter that Father Jeyapaul agree to laicization, demonstrating that the Congregation believed that the accusations were serious enough to merit dismissal from the clerical state. However, as a matter of longstanding canon law, such decisions are made by the local bishop, who is deemed to be generally in the best position to adjudicate the case relating to the priest in question.

It is important to note that the canonical proceeding involving Father Jeyapaul was wholly separate from any pending civil or criminal proceeding. The Holy See has cooperated with the requests of law enforcement authorities seeking the extradition of Father Jeyapaul to the United States, and in fact provided his exact location in India to assist such efforts.

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