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Bail reduced for California priest charged with molestation

by Monica Clark

A Catholic priest jailed for more than a month on charges of molesting a teenage girl over a two-year period had his bail reduced from \$5 million to \$700,000 Thursday and is expected to be released within a day.

Fr. Uriel Ojeda, 32, of the Diocese of Sacramento was arrested Nov. 30 after diocesan officials notified police that a relative of the alleged victim had reported the abuse.

During the bail hearing, Deputy District Attorney Allison Dunham told Judge Marjorie Koller the priest had confessed to a diocesan official that he had sexually abused the girl while he was parochial vicar at Holy Rosary Parish in Woodland, Calif., his first assignment after his ordination four years ago.

Kevin Eckery, diocesan spokesman, told the *Sacramento Bee* that Ojeda confessed Nov. 30 during a car ride to Sacramento with diocesan officials who had gone to Redding, where Ojeda had been serving since 2009, to confront him with the allegations and remove him from ministry.

Ojeda's initial bail had been set high because he was considered a flight risk, a factor his attorney denied during the Jan. 5 hearing. Defense Attorney Jesse Ortiz said Ojeda is an American citizen and that his only contact with his native Mexico has been during occasional vacations. Ortiz also said Ojeda was being wrongly compared to three other priests of the Sacramento Diocese who fled to Mexico to avoid prosecution for sex abuse.

Ojeda has strong support among Woodland and Redding parishioners. More than 200 came to Sacramento for the Jan. 5 hearing. Many wore shirts imprinted with his image.

Groups of parishioners also gathered outside Sacramento County Jail during Christmas to sing carols, hoping the popular priest would hear their voices and know of their support.

Ojeda has not yet entered a plea. Once released on bail, he will be required to remain in the Sacramento area and wear an ankle bracelet with a GPS tracking device.

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