

## Minnesota archdiocese accused of withholding child porn from police

Joe Winter | Oct. 4, 2013  
St. Paul, Minn.

The archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has been accused of withholding from police images of child pornography that were on a priest's laptop, deciding instead to place the evidence in a church-owned vault.

The second-in-charge at the archdiocese, Fr. Peter Laird, who was its vicar general and moderator of the Curia, resigned Thursday after the information from a St. Paul police report was released in court during a separate matter involving child-sex charges. According to the report, Laird appears to have had a role in keeping the information suppressed.

About 2,300 images have been found, according to the report. A forensics expert hired by the archdiocese said he "was instructed to view only some of the (computer's) contents," the police report adds.

The laptop, owned by Fr. Jonathan Shelley, was later sold at a rummage sale, and the new owner discovered the images and alerted the archdiocese in about 2003, the police report says. The images were soon secured in the vault, the report states.

Shelley was pastor at St. John the Baptist Church in Hugo, Minn., until mid-2012, when he was placed on sabbatical, then on leave a few months later.

The archdiocese for several years continued to assign him to parish duties that put him around children. Shelley is not likely to be charged with a crime because no evidence is available now, authorities said.

The report said police were told the computer was destroyed, and there appear to be additional images that have gone missing.

Laird's resignation "was his decision alone. He did nothing improper," said a statement from the archdiocese. Laird will stay on with the archdiocese in various roles and will be replaced with Fr. Charles Lachowitzer of the Church of St. John Neumann in Eagan, Minn.

"I am hopeful that my decision to step aside at this time, along with the formation of a new task force, can help repair the trust of many, especially the victims of abuse," Laird said in a statement posted on the archdiocese website.

Fr. Kevin McDonough, then vicar general, first gave the order to place in the vault the computer and its contents more than a decade ago, police said. The report said the official who was given that order, Chancellor Jennifer Haselberger, balked at it and later resigned.

[Joe Winter is a freelance writer who lives in Hudson, Wis.]

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