

Indian bishop charged with repeatedly raping nun

Indian police charged Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jalandhar with repeatedly raping a nun in her rural convent, with a charge sheet that is 2,000 pages long.

The bishop was charged April 9 with wrongful confinement, rape of a woman incapable of giving consent, causing grievous bodily harm during rape, unnatural offense and criminal intimidation. He was charged in the predominantly Catholic state of Kerala, where the nun's convent is based.

If found guilty, the bishop faces imprisonment of not less than 10 years or up to life in jail.

Ucanews.com reported the charge sheet also lists 83 witnesses, 40 of them Catholic leaders, including Cardinal George Alencherry, the major archbishop and head of the Syro-Malabar Church.

Three bishops – Joseph Kallarangatt of Palai, Kurien Valiakandathil of Bhagalpur and Sebastian Vadakel of Ujjain – and 25 Catholic nuns and 11 Catholic priests are also named as witnesses.

Bishop Mulakkal was arrested Sept. 21 after a 48-year-old member of the Missionaries of Jesus, a diocesan congregation under the prelate, complained that he raped her multiple times between 2014 and 2016 while he was visiting her convent in Kerala.

The bishop, who was in charge of the congregation, denied the allegations.

The *New York Times* reported a statement from Save Our Sisters, a group of members of India's Roman Catholic Church, who said the filing of charges "enters the annals of history as a rarest of rare incident, when a bishop is going to face trial in a court based on the complaint of a nun who is a subordinate to him."

The victim first wrote to church authorities in January 2017, the apostolic nuncio in India in January 2018, and then to Pope Francis May 14, seeking church action against Bishop Mulakkal.

She copied prefects of the congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith and for Bishops, and later sent reminders before going to the police.

On Sept. 24, the bishop was taken into judicial custody. The Vatican removed him from diocesan administrative duties, but he retained his title as its bishop.

The Kerala High Court granted bail Oct. 15 on condition that the bishop, based in northern Jalandhar City, should not enter Kerala state other than to report once a fortnight to investigating police.

A week later, Rev. Kuriakose Kattuthara, 67, considered a prime witness against the bishop, was found dead, with his family suspecting foul play.

The nun's case led to an outcry from women religious, with more reporting cases of abuse.

In November, the International Union of Superiors General called on women religious who have suffered abuse to come forward and report it to their congregations and church and state authorities.

"If the UISG receives a report of abuse, we will be a listening presence and help the person to have the courage to bring the complaint to the appropriate organizations," it added in a statement published on its website Nov. 23.

Global Sisters Report talked to five Missionaries of Jesus in India who complained of church repression for their support of their former superior general, who made the accusations.

"The Catholic Church leadership has been treating us as outcasts after we went public against Bishop Franco Mulakkal (of Jalandhar). Even the Vatican has not bothered to acknowledge our complaints," Sister Anupama Kelamangalathuveli, spokeswoman for five Missionaries of Jesus nuns, told Global Sisters Report earlier this year.

The five sisters were living with the victim in a convent in Kerala state, refusing orders to return to their own communities while the case was ongoing.

Retired Auxiliary Bishop Agnelo Gracias of Mumbai, Jalandhar Diocese's administrator, supported their position, but the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Council criticized the nuns for stirring up enemies of the church, reported Global