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(SD)-Rapid City Priest Pleads Guilty To Fondling 13-Year Old Girl

By: John Axtell Posted at: 02/06/2019 11:37 PM

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) - A Catholic priest who served in Rapid City last year has pleaded guilty to sexual contact with a child under the age of 16.

In exchange for the plea from 38-year old Father John Praveen, prosecutors are dropping an identical second sexual charge and recommending county jail time and probation. The judge is not required to accept the sentence and could give him 15 years at sentencing in April.

Praveen was accused of having sexual contact with a 13-year-old girl last September, and admitted in court to touching the girl's breasts over her clothing.

Praveen, who is from India and belongs to a religious order based there, was told his guilty plea could affect his immigration status and that he could be deported. His attorney says he will not request release prior to sentencing.

When Praveen first came to South Dakota in 2017, he worked at All Saints Church in Eagle Butte and other sites on the Cheyenne River Reservation. He was temporarily assigned to the Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Rapid City last June and served there until his arrest in October.

Bishop Robert Gruss immediately suspended Praveen from his duties and the diocese released a statement yesterday calling such abuse by anyone, much less a member of the clergy, "unconscionable" and offering thanks that the legal system led to "this revelation of the truth."

The statement also says the diocese will continue to offer assistance to the victim and her family while also praying for them, all the victims of sexual abuse, and for Father Praveen.