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## **Priest Gets Four Months in Molesting of Altar Girl**

By Andy Newman  
New York Times  
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A Roman Catholic priest was sentenced yesterday to four months in jail for molesting a 12-year-old altar girl at her home in Brooklyn in 1999.

The case against the priest, the Rev. Francis X. Nelson, was the first sexual abuse prosecution completed in New York City based on old files turned over to prosecutors by the Brooklyn Diocese last year.

Father Nelson, 39, who was removed from the diocese after the abuse occurred but soon found work at a church in Harlem, insisted he was innocent.

"I did not do anything inappropriate, sexually, physically or morally, either on that day or on any other day in my priestly life," he said before he was sentenced in State Supreme Court in Brooklyn, where he was convicted in a jury trial last month.

But Judge Albert Tomei said he agreed with the verdict and delivered a stinging sermon to the defendant. "When you became a priest, Father, you took a sacred oath," Judge Tomei said. "You became a trustee of your parishioners, spirits and souls. The safest haven was the church, where young women and young men could go and feel entirely safe."

He continued: "You didn't steal any money. You didn't assault her physically with a slap. You took her spiritual life away. You damaged her for life by your actions. This may be a misdemeanor, but it has greater ramifications than just being a misdemeanor."

The judge seemed particularly annoyed by Father Nelson's protestations of innocence. "The prosecutor, I think, was correct when she said this was not so much a crime of sexual abuse, but more a crime of arrogance," he said. "Pride goeth before a fall, Father Nelson. You know the proverb; it's in the Bible. And this is what you exercised in this case."

Despite his expressions of outrage, Judge Tomei gave Father Nelson a lighter sentence than the six months prosecutors had requested. He was sentenced to two jail terms of four months each, to be served concurrently, for his conviction on two counts of sexual abuse.

Although Judge Tomei said his decision in Father Nelson's case was "the most difficult I've ever faced in my entire life," he did not explain why he had given a lighter sentence than requested.

Judge Tomei also ordered Father Nelson to register as a sexual offender and granted the girl and her family an order of protection against him. The Brooklyn district attorney's office declined to comment on the sentence.

Father Nelson, a native of India, was a visiting priest at St. Mary Star of the Sea Church in Carroll Gardens in 1999 when he went to the girl's home, ostensibly to see her sick grandmother, prosecutors said. The girl said he brought gifts of watches and books.

At the trial, the girl testified that as her grandmother sat a few feet away in a wheelchair, Father Nelson pulled her onto his lap, pressed his crotch against her buttocks through their clothing and

rested his head on her back.

She testified that after she got up and offered Father Nelson a glass of water, he pulled her onto his lap again, put his hand up her shirt and touched her breast.

The girl's family reported what had happened to the Brooklyn Diocese, which found Father Nelson's denial not credible and ordered him out of the diocese, church officials said.

The diocese said it told Father Nelson's supervising bishop in India about the case. But the bishop, Leon A. Tharmaraj, said he had never heard about the sexual abuse and had written a recommendation that helped Father Nelson secure a job at St. Charles Borromeo Church in Harlem, where he worked until his arrest last spring.

Several dozen parishioners from St. Charles Borromeo came to support Father Nelson yesterday and complained bitterly that the judge was biased against him.

Father Nelson's lawyer, Michael Warren, strongly criticized the judge, too.

"The judge was, in effect, a handmaiden of the prosecution," Mr. Warren said. "The arguments he made were based solely on the girl's testimony and didn't take into account any of Father Nelson's testimony and the testimony of those who support him. His tirade sounded more like a summation."

Mr. Warren said he would file an appeal.

After Father Nelson was led from the courtroom, his victim, sitting in the front row, looked shaken. "All I wanted was an apology," the girl, now 16, said in a tiny voice, "and I never got that."

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