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Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jalandhar (in white hat and mask) arrives at the District and Sessions Court in Kottayam, Kerala, Sept. 16, 2020, to stand trial in a rape case against him. (Saji Thomas)



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A Catholic nun, who two years ago accused Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jalandhar of rape, started giving her testimony Wednesday in a district court in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala.

Her testimony will continue Thursday before the nun faces cross-examination by the defense lawyer.



A window of the District and Sessions Court in Kottayam, Kerala, where a Catholic nun testified in the rape trial of a bishop on Sept. 16. All the windows and doors

were closed to the public and press before the trial began. (Saji Thomas)

Amid heavy rains, the closed door session in the District and Sessions Court in Kottayam lasted from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Before the trial started, court officials closed all doors and windows and put up pink window curtains to keep the proceedings away from public view.

On Tuesday, the court imposed a gag order against the media on a request from Mulakkal, who said that coverage would undermine the presumption of innocence and a fair trial.

Police personnel were deployed on the court premises Wednesday to restrict people's movements before the accused and the victim entered the courtroom.

The nun was given special permission to enter the court through the gate used by the judge in an attempt to avoid public and media attention.

Mulakkal, however, used the public entrance, arriving at the court 15 minutes before the trial began.



The District and Sessions Court in Kottayam, Kerala, India (Saji Thomas)

Police provided special protection to the survivor and her supporters on their way to court. A police escort vehicle traveled ahead of her car from her convent in Kuravilangad, some 15 miles north of Kottayam. Her car was driven by Fr. Augustine Vattoly, an activist priest and the first convener of "Save Our Sisters," a laity movement that supports the rape victim.

Police were seen checking identities of those traveling in the nun's car as part of the security precaution.

The nun had covered her face with a scarf to avoid identification by the public. The police chased away those standing in front of the court with cameras and mobile phones, warning them of stringent legal action if they took the sister's picture.

A police inspector was heard telling bystanders that there was a strict court order against photographing the victim.

Mulakkal was clad in a shirt, trousers and a baseball cap. He was accompanied by his brother-in-law, P.P. Chacko, and a few others.



Police escort Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jalandhar (in white hat and mask) to the District and Sessions Court in Kottayam, Kerala, on Sept 16 to hear the victim's testimony in a rape case against him. (Saji Thomas)

In contrast, two dozen supporters, in addition to her family members, accompanied the nun to the courthouse premises. Her supporters included leaders of "Save Our Sisters," a laity forum that took up the rape case's cause after the church hierarchy in India offered support to the accused bishop but was unresponsive to the victim.

"We have come to share our moral support for her," said Benjamin Antony, one of the leaders of the forum that, on Sept 8, 2018, started a sit-in near the Kerala High Court demanding Mulakkal's arrest. The prelate was subsequently arrested and jailed, but released on bail Oct 15, 2018.

"This case is going to be a watershed in the Catholic Church as it will lead to the revival of the original church," Antony told Global Sisters Report outside the court.

The lay leader said that the case of a bishop raping a nun, who was under his patronage, shows that current church leaders have deviated from the original mission of Jesus Christ. The rape survivor is a member of the Missionaries of Jesus, a congregation under the Jalandhar Diocese.

"Many such incidents take place in the church but no one dares to question them. This case, I am sure, will empower nuns to raise their voices and ensure such incidents are not repeated in the church," Antony said.

Vowing allegiance to his Catholic faith, Antony says he wants to see the church live by Christ's values and take care of those in need.

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Stanley Paulose, associate general secretary of Joint Christian Council, another laity group, said he was happy that the trial has begun despite many delays. His council too had joined the 2018 sit-in demonstration.

"The Holy Spirit worked so strongly after we started the protest and now the accused bishop is standing trial, despite his influence, money power and efforts to get the case dismissed," Paulose told GSR.

Mulakkal had tried to get the case dismissed saying he was falsely targeted for taking disciplinary action against his accuser. However, his plea was rejected by the Kottayam court. He then appealed to the Kerala High Court and the Supreme Court. Both the appellate courts upheld the lower court order and asked him to stand trial, saying the case has sufficient merit.

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Vattoly, the first SOS convener who was forced to quit the post under church pressure, said, "The case has exposed the non-transparent functioning of the Catholic Church hierarchy that refused to listen to the pleas of a tortured nun."

The case, he noted, has reached the trial stage earlier than expected "despite the strong backing of the Catholic Church leadership to the accused bishop."

Vattoly says the case is "a living example" of how church leaders try to silence "a hapless woman," and would not have become such a public scandal if the hierarchy had taken proactive steps to address the rape survivor's grievances. "On the

contrary, she and her family members were targeted by the accused while the top church leaders remained silent to her repeated cries for help," he told GSR.



Fr. Augustine Vattoly, an activist priest (second from left in green shirt), shares a snack with other supporters of the rape survivor Sept. 16, 2020, at a kiosk near the district court in Kottayam, Kerala. They had come to give moral support to the nun who made her first court appearance to deliver testimony. (Saji Thomas)

The priest urges the church "to open its eyes to the realities and protect the weak rather than their oppressors. This is the only way for the church to remain relevant in today's world."

The elder sister of the rape survivor says the incident has "pained us all immensely."

"But, we are all together to ensure that our sister gets justice," she told GSR outside the court premises where she came with another sister and their only brother.

Meanwhile, Mulakkal's family members also say the case has brought them much agony. "Our family and relatives have suffered so much on account of this case, which is beyond our comprehension," said Chacko, Mulakkal's brother-in-law.

However, he sounded confident that the prelate will be vindicated. "The bishop will emerge victorious at the end of the trial, because the truth always triumphs," he told GSR.

Mulakkal is accused of raping the former superior general of the Missionaries of Jesus 13 times between 2014 and 2016. Although the bishop is based in the northern Indian state of Punjab, the alleged incidents took place in the congregation's convent in Kuravilangad, a village near Kottayam, Kerala.

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Police arrested him on Sept. 21, 2018, a fortnight after the sit-in in Kochi.

Ahead of his arrest, the Vatican had accepted his request to temporarily remove him from the bishop's duties. Although the Vatican appointed a diocesan administrator, Mulakkal continues to live in the Jalandhar bishop's house and retains his title as bishop.

In April 2019, a special investigation team of the Kerala police filed a 2,000-page charge sheet against Mulakkal. The case has listed 83 witnesses, including Cardinal George Alencherry, head of the Syro-Malabar Church based in Kerala.

[Saji Thomas is a freelance journalist based in Bhopal, a central Indian city. He has worked for several mainstream newspapers such as The Times of India. This article is part of a collaboration between GSR and Matters India, a news portal that focuses on religious and social issues in India.]

This story appears in the **Bishop Mulakkal trial** feature series. View the full series.