

Brick priest sentenced for groping

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TOMS RIVER – Fallen from grace, broke and sick, a popular Brick priest just wants to return to his native India, his attorney told a judge on Friday.

But the sentence Superior Court Judge James M. Blaney imposed on the Rev. Marukudiyil Velan for groping a woman in 2012 dashed the clergyman's hopes of going home any time soon.

Velan, better known as "Father Chris" to parishioners at Church of the Visitation in Brick, was placed on probation for two years for a crime that he still says he is innocent of.

Jury: Brick priest groped mom but not children (</story/news/crime/jersey-mayhem/2014/10/15/brick-priest-trial/17303301/>)

"I can't bear any more of this pain," the 67-year-old priest told the judge before he was sentenced. "I didn't do anything wrong. ... I couldn't believe what happened."

But Blaney disagreed with the diminutive cleric.

"The reality is, that you did do something wrong," the judge said. "You were in a position of trust, a sacred trust, a spiritual trust. ... You took advantage of your position as a priest and violated that trust. That's wrong."

Velan stood trial before Blaney in October on a total of seven charges, one involving the woman he was convicted of groping, and the others accusing him of molesting the woman's two children, who were ages 5 and 13 in 2012, when the alleged incidents occurred in Brick. The jury convicted Velan of having criminal sexual contact with the mother, but acquitted him of all the charges related to her children.

(<https://www.app.com/story/news/local/brick-point-pleasant/brick/2014/07/04/brick-woman-sues-priest/12226987/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>)

The most serious of the charges that Velan was acquitted of was sexual assault on the woman's 5-year-old daughter, which would have resulted in a prison term of five to 10 years if he was convicted.

Still, defense attorney S. Karl Mohel said the probationary term will prevent Velan from returning to his family in India for its duration.

Mohel had asked the judge, in imposing his sentence, to consider the toll the charges against Velan have taken on him. Velan lost his job with the Diocese of Trenton, and his health is failing, the defense attorney said.

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"He has suffered immensely as a result of these charges," Mohel told the judge. "His dream is to return to his home in India and start a new life there. He can no longer earn a living here. He's living on Social Security"

Mohel said Velan never had any previous brushes with the law.

Terry Ann Linardakis, assistant Ocean County prosecutor, asserted that Velan used his former position with the church to take advantage of the victim.

(<https://www.app.com/story/news/crime/jersey-mayhem/2014/10/14/brick-priest-trial/17252185/>)

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The victim did not attend the sentencing hearing.

She has a civil suit pending against Velan, the church and the diocese.

Mohel, outside the courtroom, said he still believes in his client's innocence.

"I think he was a victim of a cold, orchestrated plan to bleed the diocese of money," the defense attorney said of his client.

Meanwhile, the leader of an advocacy group for people abused by priests issued a prepared statement expressing disappointment in the sentence Velan received.

"We are sad that Father Marukudiyil Velan, known as 'Father Chris,' will not do jail time," David Clohessy, director of the St. Louis, Missouri-based Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, said in the statement. "But we are grateful to the brave family that reported this priest's crimes. And we are confident that this mom's courage to speak up and seek justice will protect more people."

One of a handful of parishioners who attended the sentencing hearing in support of Velan tearfully defended him afterward.

"He's just a good man," Joanne Nebenburgh of Brick, a parishioner at Church of the Visitation, said of Velan. ""That's the problem - he's too good."

Nebenburgh said parishioners could call Velan at any time of the night or day, and he would be there to help them.

She and a much larger group of parishioners had attended Velan's trial daily.

At the trial, the mother testified that she, her son and daughter were groped by Velan in the family's home on July 13, 2012, before all of them went out for pizza together. In addition, the boy testified he was molested in April of that year in the priest's car while they were stopped at a red light, en route to a fast-food restaurant. The girl did not testify.

Mohel argued at the trial that it didn't make sense for the priest to molest the whole family, and for them all to go out for pizza afterward. He said the priest had met the family several years earlier while on his regular rounds distributing day-old baked goods to poor families in the neighborhood.

Velan, in a statement videotaped by detectives and played for the jury, acknowledged touching the woman's breasts while hugging her, but he said he resisted inappropriate moves that were made toward him by the children.

Blaney, in addition to placing Velan on probation, ordered the priest to undergo a mental-health evaluation and abide by any recommendations made by the professionals.

Because the crime Velan was convicted of is a fourth-degree offense, he is not required to register his whereabouts with police, a requirement of some convicted sex offenders under Megan's Law.

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