

Bond set for priest indicted in weapons smuggling

BROWNSVILLE (AP) — An arraignment has been scheduled next week for a Roman Catholic priest accused of trying to smuggle weapons into Mexico, authorities say.

The Rev. Salomon Sandoval of San Martin de Porras Catholic Church in Alton answered a summons Wednesday, and U.S. Magistrate William Mallett set the formal arraignment for Feb. 7.

Sandoval, who has been indicted, was released on personal recognizance bond pending the arraignment.

Alton City Commissioner Salvador Vela, also charged in the case, appeared before U.S. Magistrate Susan Reese Williams of McAllen. His bond was set at \$20,000. He was not detained.

Roman Catholic officials and parishioners in South Texas were shocked and perplexed by the charges, which accuse Sandoval of acting as a "middleman" for two Mexican nationals seeking to buy firearms.

"Everyone is in shock. No one has any explanation," said Sarah E. Rodriguez, a spokeswoman for the Brownsville Catholic diocese.

"This was all news to us as much as anyone," she said.

Sandoval and Bishop John Fitzpatrick in Brownsville declined comment.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Guerra said he, too, doesn't understand the priest's alleged involvement in gun smuggling.

"Why he did it, I don't know," Guerra said.

An indictment returned by a federal grand jury in Brownsville on Tuesday says Sandoval acted as a middleman to purchase four, 9mm Uzi semi-automatic weapons for Jorge Wong and Luis Davalos, both from Mexico.

Guerra said the priest contacted Alfredo Cumpian of Harlingen and Vela, who who purchased the guns on July 13 and 14. The men then attempted to ship the

weapons to Mexican as "helicopter parts," Guerra said.

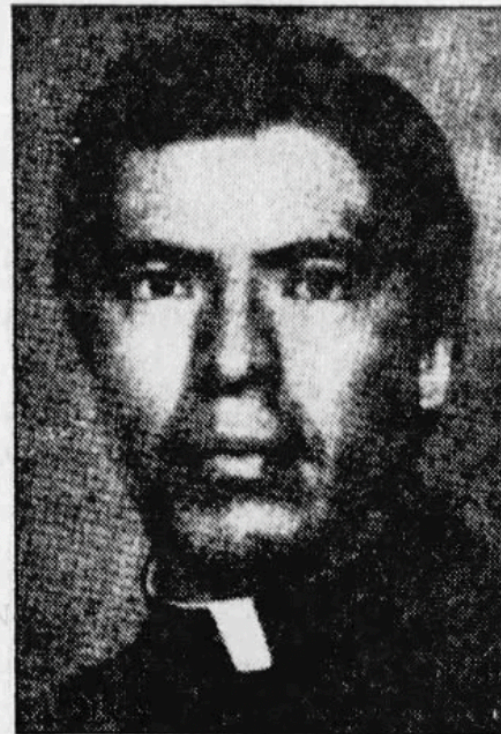
The priest was charged with one count of conspiracy to give a false statement and four counts of making false statements.

Guerra said Sandoval was approached by Wong and Davalos last summer, and allegedly contacted Cumpian and Vela. U.S. authorities received a tip and seized the guns before they were shipped, Guerra said.

Cumpian is charged with one count of conspiracy and three counts of giving false statements. Vela is charged with one count of conspiracy and one count of giving a false statement.

Wong and Davalos each are charged with one count of conspiracy and four counts of making false statements.

All five men face five years imprisonment on each count, plus fines ranging from \$10,000 to \$30,000, if convicted, Guerra said.



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Rev. Salomon Sandoval