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Archdiocese: Investigation clears cathedral rector Ortega

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The Rev. Adam Ortega y Ortiz

The Archdiocese of Santa Fe has cleared the rector of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi of any wrongdoing involving youth.

But the chancellor of the archdiocese, the Very Rev. John Cannon, wrote in a letter dated Nov. 12 that the Rev. Adam Lee Ortega y Ortiz should be cautious in his dealings with young people.

The investigation was apparently launched Oct. 23 when the cathedral's music director, Xavier Gonzales, sent an email to 45 parishioners accusing Ortega of "crude and inappropriate behavior" and an "inability to keep his hands to himself."

Cannon said in his letter, released Friday by Ortega, that "numerous" employees, volunteer ministers and clergy at the cathedral were interviewed about the allegations and the matter is now closed.

Gonzales, who wrote the email after he was fired by Ortega, confirmed Friday that he was among those interviewed, but not until Nov. 13, the day after Cannon wrote the letter clearing Ortega of the charges.

Gonzales also said that on Nov. 4, his mother was told by Ortega that her services on the finance council of Cristo Rey Church, where Ortega also serves as rector, were no longer needed.

"It's been made very obvious that communicating with the Archdiocese at this point is like talking to a box of rocks," Gonzales said in an email. "I think that because Archbishop [Michael] Sheehan is apparently retiring within the next year to two years, he would seemingly like this issue to be brushed under the rug like it has been casually done for so many years. It is sickening that there is no concern for the people who make up our Church nor the direction of the Cathedral Basilica — the Mother Church of the Archdiocese! It seems they would rather be in charge of a sinking ship."

Ortega, 48, initially declined to comment on Gonzales' allegations of improprieties, although he referred to them during Mass on Oct. 27 and also sent out a Facebook invitation that week, asking for letters of support. On Nov. 17, he read portions of the letter clearing him during the Sunday Mass at the cathedral.

In the letter, the chancellor said, "The general consensus from those interviewed is that you are very friendly towards the youth, and there was no indication of any inappropriate touching."

But Cannon also wrote, “I would ask you to be cautious about any actions, especially around youth, which although completely innocent may be perceived by others looking on as a violation of personal boundaries.”

The letter said that none of those interviewed during the investigation “expressed feelings of harassment, intimidation, bullying or a hostile work environment.”

Some former parishioners and employees of the cathedral interviewed by *The New Mexican*, however, charged that more than half the cathedral staff, most of them older people, were fired by Ortega or prompted to resign, and that his focus on young people had alienated many older parishioners.

Ortega said in an email Friday downsizing the staff was necessary for financial reasons and that he has not discriminated against older parishioners.

“Positions were eliminated, people were not terminated,” he wrote. “Age was and never is an issue. I never intentionally ignore anyone. Ministry to the youth has been an important part of my ministry that I SHARE along side with other adults in our faith community. Never alone.”

Ortega, a respected clergyman appointed rector of the cathedral in June 2012, was the pastor of Santa María de la Paz Catholic Community for a dozen years before that.

“There will always be those who will find something wrong and misinterpret my actions or choose to see things in a negative way,” he wrote. “For every one of them, there are hundreds more who understand and trust my work and are wanting to share in this great ministry.”

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