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MAY 11, 2022 BALTIMORE, MD CHILD EXPLOITATION

**HSI Baltimore-led investigation results in
22-year prison sentence for former
Baltimore priest for coercion and**

enticement of a minor to engage in illegal sexual activity

The defendant, who was a priest in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, admitted to producing nude images of 4 additional minor victims – with most of the images being taken when the victims were less than 5 years old

BALTIMORE - An investigation led by the Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Baltimore Field Office landed a former Baltimore priest in prison for more than two decades. Fernando Cristancho, age 65, of Bel Air, Maryland, was sentenced to 22 years in federal prison followed by lifetime supervised release, on May 11, for coercion and enticement of a minor who he met through the church to engage in illegal sexual activity.

Cristancho also admitted that he produced nude images of four other minor victims. He served as a priest in the Archdiocese of Baltimore; in Baltimore County; in Harford County, Maryland; and as an assistant priest in Alexandria, Virginia. Upon his release from prison, Cristancho must register as a sex offender in any place he may reside, work, or study, under the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA).

The investigation was led by HSI Baltimore, with significant assistance from the Maryland U.S. Attorney's Office, the Maryland State Police; Harford County Sheriff's Office and Harford County State's Attorney's Office.

“Cristancho’s crimes are particularly horrendous, as he was in a position of trust and took advantage of the most precious and vulnerable members of our society: our children,” said acting Special Agent in Charge Selwyn Smith of HSI Baltimore. “Cristancho’s sentence should serve as a warning to anyone who would bring harm to our children, especially those in positions of public trust. HSI Baltimore is proud to have worked with our law-enforcement partners to bring Cristancho to justice.”

Cristancho was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest in Colombia, South

America, in 1985 and moved to Alexandria, Virginia, where he worked as an assistant priest. In approximately 1999, Cristancho was granted faculties to work as a priest in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, and worked as a priest in Baltimore County, and at St. Ignatius Catholic Church in Harford County. In 2002, the Archdiocese of Baltimore revoked Cristancho's faculties to work as a priest in the Archdiocese.

Cristancho said that his primary victim was 11, 12, and 13 years old at the time of the offenses against him. The victim's family were members of St. Ignatius. Soon after Cristancho arrived at St. Ignatius in 1999, he began to spend time with the family outside of church, including meals at restaurants and the family's home, and at family gatherings. The victim also became a lector at the church, with Cristancho working closely with him and coaching him in that process.

Beginning when his victim was 11, Cristancho asked the victim for back rubs; offered the victim alcohol; took the victim to dinner, kissed the victim, told the victim that he loved him; and acted as if they were in a romantic relationship. Cristancho also showed the victim pornography and suggested they do the same sexual activities.

After Cristancho was no longer working at the church, he arranged to hold religious services in the home of a parishioner, with the victim performing as a lector or altar server. Additionally, in the summer of 2002, Cristancho invited himself to attend the victim's family's camping trip and arranged to sleep next to the victim in a tent. Following the camping trip, Cristancho arranged for the victim to assist around Cristancho's house. Eventually, Cristancho arranged to have the victim spend the weekend at Cristancho's house which he did on a regular basis well into 2003. It was during these weekends that Cristancho sexually abused his victim. Cristancho sexually abused his victim from 2002 through at least Fall 2003.

In September 2017, Cristancho went to a retail pharmacy to use the store's photo printing equipment. When a store employee assisted Cristancho, they observed several photos of naked children and an image of what appeared to

be a bite mark on a young boy's buttocks on Cristancho's smartphone. The employee subsequently made a report.

Law enforcement initiated an investigation, and a search warrant was executed at Cristancho's residence in September 2017. During the search warrant, investigators seized various digital devices including a smartphone. A subsequent forensic examination of the phone resulted in the discovery of nude photos and videos of four other minor victims, with most of the images being recorded when the victims were less than five years old.

This case was brought as part of Project Safe Childhood, a nationwide initiative launched in May 2006 by the Department of Justice to combat the growing epidemic of child sexual exploitation and abuse. Led by the United States Attorney's Offices and the Criminal Division's Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section, Project Safe Childhood marshals federal, state, and local resources to locate, apprehend, and prosecute individuals who sexually exploit children, and to identify and rescue victims.

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