Pa. priest detained until trial

By Joe Mandak
The Associated Press

JOHNSTOWN — A Roman Catholic priest from Pennsylvania was ordered to remain jailed until his trial on charges that he possessed child pornography and traveled to Honduras for sex with children during missionary trips.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Keith Pesto ordered the Rev. Joseph Maurizio Jr., 69, detained after prosecution evidence contrasted sharply with character witnesses who on Monday described the defendant as "priestly, faithful and committed to helping."

"What you're describing is Jekyll and Hyde, Father Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," Pesto said, before noting he can't let "Jekyll go free and detain Mr. Hyde."

Maurizio has been jailed since Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents arrested him Thursday. A criminal complaint alleges Maurizio gave boys candy and money so he could molest them — including performing a sex act on a 14-year-old in a chapel — or watch the boys have sex. It happened during missions trips to Honduras with his self-run charity in 2009 and prior years, according to the complaint. Maurizio has been placed on leave from the Somerset County church he also pastored.



The Tribune-Democrat/John Rucosky

Joseph Maurizo, former priest at Our Lady Queen of Angels Catholic Church in Central City is led into U.S. federal court in Johnstown by U.S. Marshals for a detention hearing Monday, on charges of engaging in illicit sex in foreign countries and possession of child pornography.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Stephanie Haines told the judge authorities have found "child erotica" — which may later be proven to be child pornography — on the priest's camera when he returned from another Central American country in July. Federal agents were still reviewing the 18,000 images and won't know for about three weeks whether any are criminal.

For now, the child pornography case is based on two photos of a polio-stricken boy found on Maurizio's rectory computer, though agents are also poring through four other computers and various storage discs and other devices. The Honduran boy was "posed" to show off his genitals and could not have moved that way by himself. Haines said. He has since died.

To keep Maurizio jailed, Haines had to convince the judge that the priest was either a threat to flee the country or dangerous. She said two Pennsylvania boys, ages 7 and 5, came forward with new abuse allegations during the weekend after learning of his arrest. Those claims are still being investigated, Haines said.

Defense attorney Stephen Passarello argued the government's case is weak, based as it is on two pictures and abuse allegations at least five years old. He called a couple, Drs. Vincent and Johanna Vena, former parishioners who have traveled with Maurizio on missions trips.

The priest is "an individual who is absolutely committed to helping some of the most desperate people in the world, and I've had the opportunity to witness that firsthand," Dr. Vincent Vena testified.

The doctor acknowledged he wasn't aware of a text message Haines said the priest sent to a 16-year-old boy during the trip, asking to spend the night, but said he had no reservations about the priest's contact with his teen sons.

Outside the courtroom, Passarello claimed a rival charity, Pronino USA, and Dutch "atheists" conspired to bribe poor Honduran children to accuse the priest. Pronino USA didn't immediately return calls and emails seeking comment.

"They were offered money, toys and candy and ordered to say things about Father Joe," Passarello told the judge. "That's the climate we're in with this case."

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