News

John Feit enters the 92nd state District Court before the verdict was read in his trial for the 1960 murder of Irene Garza Thursday, Dec. 7, 2017, at the Hidalgo County Courthouse in Edinburg, Texas. Feit was found guilty of Garza's murder. (Nathan Lambrecht/The Monitor via AP)

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A jury on Friday sentenced an 85-year-old former priest to life in prison for the 1960 killing of a schoolteacher and former beauty queen who was a member of the parish he served.

The same jurors in Hidalgo County in South Texas found John Bernard Feit guilty of murder Thursday night. Prosecutors asked jurors Friday for a 57-year prison term — one year for each year he had walked free since killing Irene Garza after she went to him for confession at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in McAllen, Texas.

The 25-year-old Garza disappeared April 16, 1960. Her bludgeoned body was found days later. An autopsy revealed she had been raped while unconscious, and beaten and suffocated.

Prosecutor Michael Garza, who is not related to the victim, had asked the jury not to view the now elderly and weak Feit as he is today, but to try to imagine him as a 28-year-old man capable of subduing the woman.

The jury deliberated just over four hours Friday before deciding on the maximum sentence. Afterward, Garza said at a news conference that he wished that he could take credit for the conviction and sentence, "but it was God-driven."

"I can say this: Pigs are flying, and Irene is resting," he said.

Feit, then a priest at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, came under suspicion in the investigation early on. He told police that he heard Garza's confession in the church rectory rather than in the confessional, but denied he had killed her.

Among the evidence that pointed to Feit as a suspect over the years: Two priests told authorities that Feit had confessed to them. One of them said he saw scratches on Feit soon after Garza's disappearance. His portable photographic slide viewer was found near Garza's body.

Feit had also been accused of attacking another young woman in a church in a nearby town just weeks before Garza's death. He pleaded no contest and was fined

$500.

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Prosecutors presented evidence earlier in the week that church and elected officials suspected Feit but didn't want to prosecute him. They feared it could harm the reputations of the church and Hidalgo County elected officials, most of whom were Catholic. Sen. John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, was running for president that year.

Feit was sent to a treatment center for troubled priests in New Mexico, later becoming a supervisor with responsibility in the clearing of priests for parish assignments. Among the men Feit helped keep in ministry was child molester James Porter, who assaulted more than 100 victims before he was defrocked and sent to prison.

Feit left the priesthood in 1972, married and went on to work at the Catholic charity St. Vincent de Paul in Phoenix, training and recruiting volunteers and helping oversee the charity's network of food pantries.

Garza's family members and friends had long pushed authorities to reopen the case, and it became an issue in the 2014 district attorney's race. Ricardo Rodriguez had promised that if elected, he would re-examine the case.