News



Bishop Franco Mulakkal greets the media as he leaves a court in Kottayam, India, Jan. 14, 2022, after his acquittal of raping a nun. Mulakkal resigned as leader of the Jalandhar Diocese in the northern state of Punjab on June 1, 2023. (AP Photo/File)



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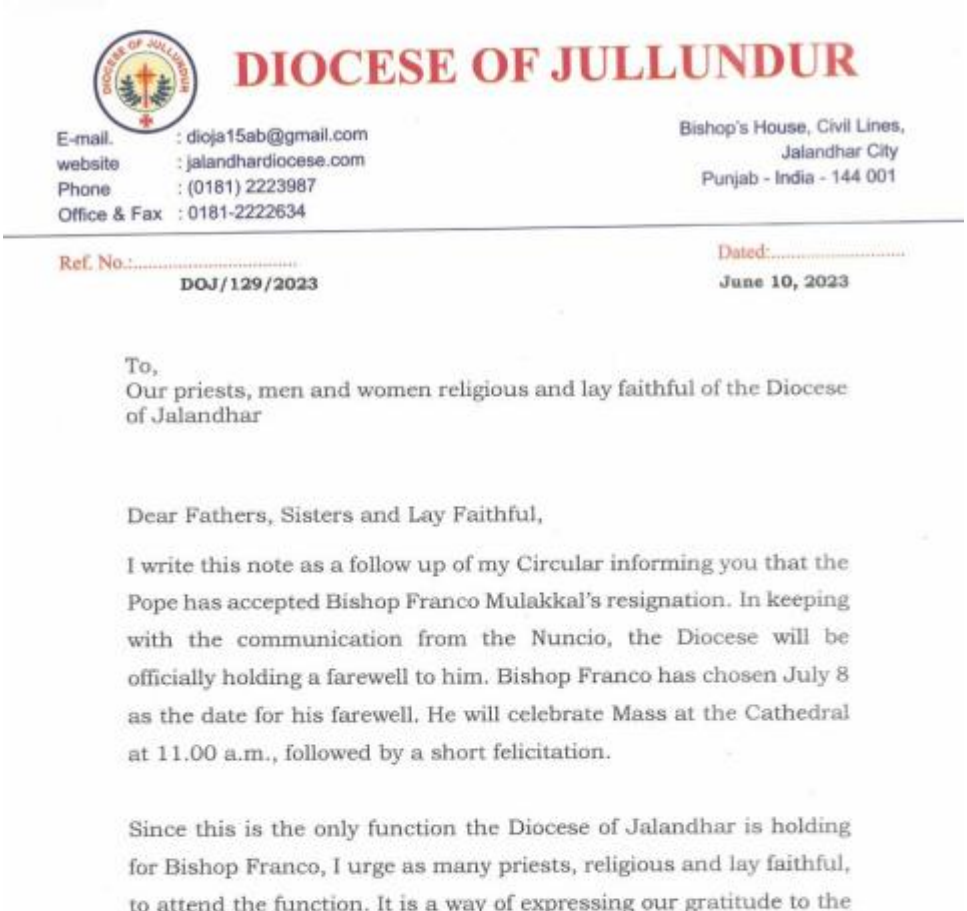
A Catholic bishop in India who was acquitted of a rape charge from a nun has resigned, but the complainant's supporters say the fight is not yet over.

The resignation of Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jalandhar June 1 has brought some relief to the complainant's supporters who, for the past five years, have demanded his removal from the bishop's office.

"It is better to be late than never," said Fr. Augustine Vattoly, former convener of Save Our Sisters, an action council formed to support the complainant and five nuns from her congregation supporting her.

However, the bishop's resignation has left many questions unanswered about the way the Vatican and the Indian hierarchy handled the sensitive case that brought international shame to the church, says the priest of the Archdiocese of Ernakulam-Angamaly.

Vattoly and the complainant both live in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala, where Mulakkal is now engaged in preaching and counseling at a retreat center.



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Ref. No.: DOJ/129/2023

Dated: June 10, 2023

To,
Our priests, men and women religious and lay faithful of the Diocese of Jalandhar

Dear Fathers, Sisters and Lay Faithful,

I write this note as a follow up of my Circular informing you that the Pope has accepted Bishop Franco Mulakkal's resignation. In keeping with the communication from the Nuncio, the Diocese will be officially holding a farewell to him. Bishop Franco has chosen July 8 as the date for his farewell. He will celebrate Mass at the Cathedral at 11.00 a.m., followed by a short felicitation.

Since this is the only function the Diocese of Jalandhar is holding for Bishop Franco, I urge as many priests, religious and lay faithful, to attend the function. It is a way of expressing our gratitude to the

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Mulakkal says he resigned even after the court declared him innocent for the better functioning of Jalandhar, a diocese in the northern state of Punjab. He was the Jalandhar bishop from June 13, 2013, until September 21, 2018, when he stepped aside after the case was filed.

In a farewell to his diocese, Mulakkal celebrated Mass July 8 at Mary's Cathedral in Jalandhar.

Mulakkal says the appeals against his acquittal would take at least 20 years for India's appellate courts to decide. "If I had not resigned, the Vatican would not have been able to appoint a new bishop for the diocese," he told GSR by phone from Christeen Retreat Centre in Kerala's Kottayam where he resides. He has just returned from four retreat assignments overseas.

Asked about his plans, Mulakkal said, "Right now I spend six to seven hours before the Blessed Sacrament. I also interact with people who come to me seeking counseling and other guidance which I used to do in the past. ... I will decide the future course of action as God inspires me."

When accepting Mulakkal's resignation, the Vatican allowed him to use the title of bishop emeritus and clarified that its demand for resignation was not "a disciplinary measure" and that his emeritus status does not imply "canonical restrictions on his ministry."



Fr. Augustine Vattoly of the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese (GSR file photo/Saji Thomas)

A press statement from the apostolic nuncio in New Delhi said the Vatican asked Mulakkal to resign "for the good of the diocese."

Vattoly told GSR he was unhappy about the Vatican's decision to allow Mulakkal to continue his priestly ministries without waiting for the final verdict on his acquittal.

The case began in June 2018 when a former superior general of the Missionaries of Jesus, a congregation under the Jalandhar Diocese, complained to the police in Kottayam that Mulakkal, who was the congregation's patron, had raped her 13 times between 2014 and 2016 at their convent in Kuravilangad, a village near Kottayam.

The police registered a criminal case against Mulakkal, but when police delayed acting on it, civil society groups such as Save Our Sisters launched a protest on Sept. 8, 2018, near the Kerala High Court in Kochi, the state's capital. The complainant's five supporters also sat through the protest demanding Mulakkal's arrest.

Mulakkal was arrested on Sept 21, 2018, and charged with wrongful confinement, rape, unnatural sex and criminal intimidation.

Mulakkal denied all the charges throughout the trial, which began in August 2020 and ended in December 2021 in the District and Sessions Court of Kottayam.

The court acquitted Mulakkal on Jan. 14, 2022, saying the prosecution had failed to prove the charges against him.



Sr. Elsa Muttathu, national secretary of the Conference of Religious India and a member of the Union of Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Courtesy of Elsa Muttathu)

Vattoly and Sr. Elsa Muttathu, national secretary of the Conference of Religious India , criticized the church authorities' handling of the case.

"Their actions have exposed a divided church, its patriarchal mindset and an unhealthy internal power struggle," Muttathu told GSR.

The Mulakkal case has damaged the image of the church, priests and the religious, said Muttathu, a member of the Union of Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Vattoly says "the criminal silence" of the authorities in the Indian church and the Vatican in the case has disappointed everyone, with many young Catholics leaving the church. The resignation would not bring them back, he added.

At the same time, Vattoly sees the Vatican asking Mulakkal to resign as a positive sign. "The Vatican has sent out a clear message to the church hierarchy, especially bishops, that their sins will not be pardoned. It has also reiterated its zero tolerance to sexual abuses in the church," he said.

Meanwhile, two of the complainant's supporters have left the congregation to take on private jobs. One received dispensation from the congregation and the other is awaiting a response.

Related: Q & A with Sr. Maria Nirmalini on her first year leading India's Catholic religious

The complainant and her three other supporters now stay in the Kuravilangad convent with the police keeping guard around the clock.

Sr. Anupama Kelamangalathuveli, the spokesperson of the complainant, refused to comment on the Mulakkal resignation or other issues. "Sorry, I won't be able to give comments," she told GSR.

One of the two sisters who left the congregation told GSR on condition of anonymity that her departure does not mean she has abandoned her support of the complainant. "I will be with them throughout this case."

She questioned the church's "studied silence" in the case. "We contacted all church leaders, including cardinals, for justice, but they did nothing for us. Where is justice in the Catholic Church?"

Mulakkal resigned, she added, only after making "our lives miserable and damaging the church's image globally."



In November 2018, nuns who have supported the accusation of rape against Bishop Franco Mulakkal leave after offering prayers at a chapel in St. Francis Mission Home, in Kuravilangad in southern Indian state of Kerala. (AP/Manish Swarup)

She said they only wanted a place to stay without Mulakkal's interference, and she wondered if the Vatican considers the complainant and her supporters to be liars. "The church authorities instead tried to suppress our voice and supported Mulakkal," she said.

In another development, the congregation has left the Kuravilangad convent to the complainant and her three companions, and transferred the rest of the sisters to other places.

Sr. Anit Kuvalloor, the congregation's superior general, did not return phone calls or messages from GSR.

However, Bishop Agnelo Gracias, apostolic administrator of Jalandhar, confirmed the changes in the Kuravilangad convent.

"Yes, it is true that four nuns now stay in the convent while others have been transferred out," Gracias told GSR.

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The prelate also indicated attempts to appease the complainant and her companions. "Right now, they cannot be shifted to other places as they are under police protection," the bishop said.

Meanwhile, efforts are on to speed up the appeals in the Kerala High Court.

In a June 13 letter to the Kerala chief justice, Justice Michael Saldanha questioned the genuineness of Mulakkal's acquittal order.

"The judgment in question was prepared on behalf of the accused and thereafter, pronounced by the learned trial Judge," said Saldanha, a former high court judge. He added he sought an internal probe and action against those involved in it.

Saldanha, a Catholic, sent a similar letter to Pope Francis June 14 through the nunciature demanding a church-mandated probe against Mulakkal instead of accepting the civil court order.



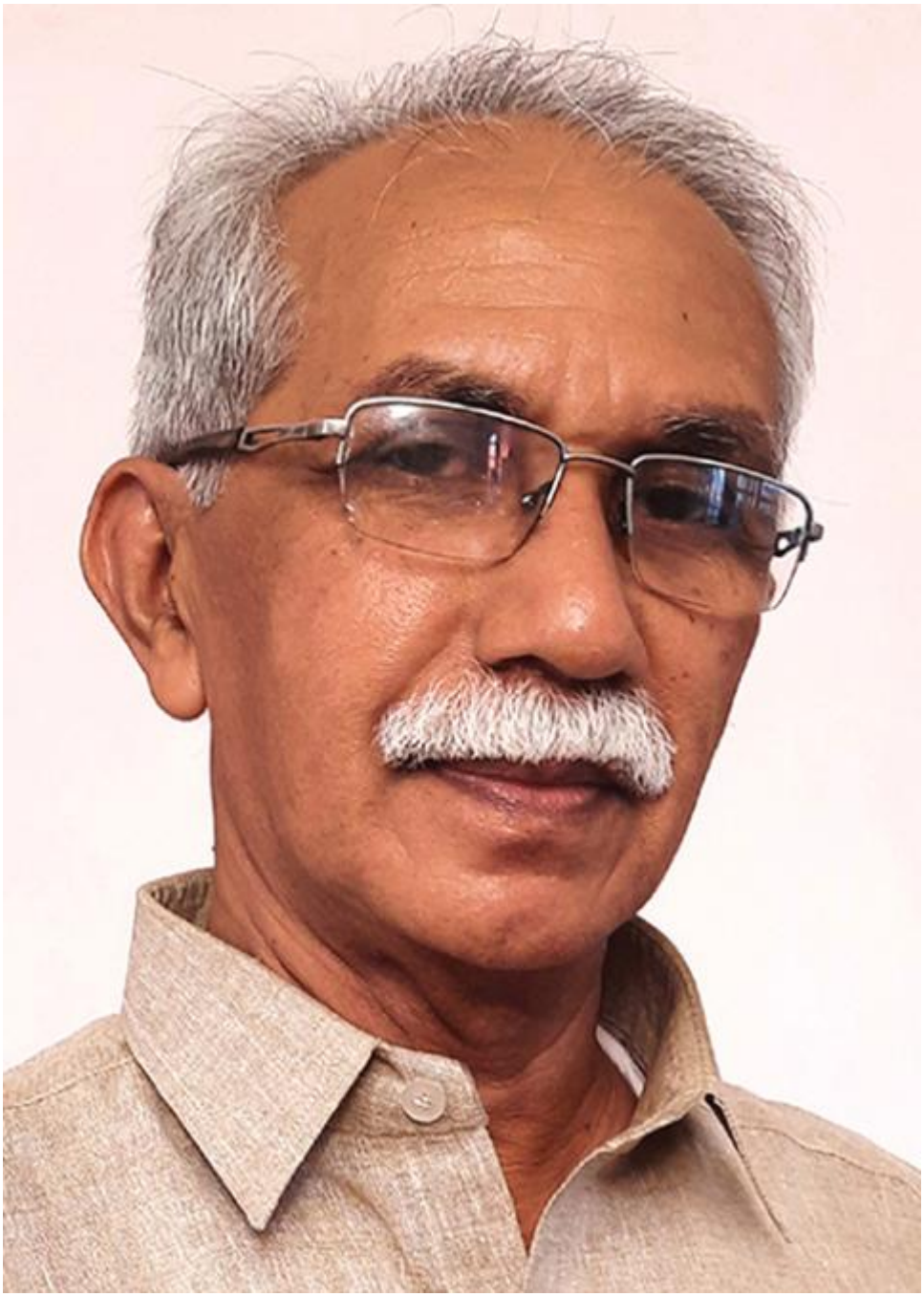
The District and Sessions Court of Kottayam, where Bishop Franco Mulakkal was acquitted on Jan. 14, 2022 (Saji Thomas)

A probe into Mulakkal's acquittal was also demanded by a senior advocate in Kerala, Jose Joseph, who alleges the order was written at the behest of the accused.

"I had complained to the chief justice of India, demanding a probe into the outsourcing of the order. He asked me to approach the high court, the right forum to deal with it," Joseph told GSR. He plans to file a complaint in the high court soon.

Felix Pulludan, the Save Our Sisters president, says his group will seek the high court's permission to become a party to the pending appeals of the complainant as well as the Kerala government.

"It is essential that the appeals be heard urgently out of turn as the accuser and her companion nuns now live a caged life with police protection," he told GSR.



Felix Pulludan, president of Save Our Sisters (Courtesy of Felix Pulludan)

He says fast-tracking the case would bring justice to the complainant and her companions. "Mulakkal now walks free with the help of a manufactured order while the nuns are being punished for telling the truth," he said.

Kennedy Karimbinkalayil, a Mulakkal supporter, rejected that the acquittal order was manipulated.

"Even if the Supreme Court gives Bishop Mulakkal a clean chit, a section of the media and public would still believe that he committed the alleged offenses," Karimbinkalayil told GSR.

He welcomed Mulakkal's resignation as a good move for the church and the diocese, "as half of its priests were not in favor of his return to the diocese."

Muttathu points out some positive outcomes of the Mulakkal case. "It gives us an opportunity to critically evaluate the position of the clergy and women religious in the church. The women religious are still not part of serious decision making in the church."

The case has also prompted the Conference of Religious India to set up a national redressal commission to address issues affecting 103,000 women among India's more than 130,000 Catholic religious. The conference has also started awareness programs and confidence-building exercises among women religious.

"We will assist them to address their concerns unlike in the past, and ensure that they speak up and do not hush up their ill-treatment," Muttathu told GSR.

This story appears in the **Bishop Mulakkal trial** feature series. View the full series.