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Bishop Jose Sebastian Thekkumcherikunnel (UCA News file image)

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The Vatican has appointed a new bishop for India’s Jalandhar Diocese in Punjab, two years after Bishop Franco Mulakkal stepped down despite a court clearing him of charges of raping a nun.

The Vatican named Fr. Jose Sebastian Thekkumcherikunnel as the new bishop on June 7. The 62-year-old priest serves as the financial administrator of the diocese.

The diocese, which has been without a bishop for nearly seven years, has not announced the date of episcopal ordination.

Retired Auxiliary Bishop Agnelo Rufino Gracias of Mumbai has been serving as its apostolic administrator since Sept. 20, 2018, a day before police arrested Mulakkal based on the complaint made to law enforcement.

Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jalandhar, India, is led away for questioning by police Sept. 19, 2018, on the outskirts of Cochin. (CNS/Reuters/Sivaram V)

The nun had, through her spokesperson, claimed that she felt compelled to report to the police after church officials, including the Vatican, ignored her multiple complaints and appeals against Mulakkal, who was the patron of her congregation at

that time.

The nun is a former superior general of the Jalandhar diocesan congregation, Missionaries of Jesus.

The nun in her complaint in June 2018 accused Mulakkal of raping her 13 times between 2014 and 2016 when he visited her convent in southern Kerala state.

Mulakkal resigned from office after a Kerala district court acquitted him in January 2022 of all allegations of rape, intimidation, and unlawful confinement of the nun.

The complainant and the state government have both challenged the acquittal order in the state High Court. The case has not yet been scheduled for a hearing, suggesting a potentially lengthy legal battle.

Both Mulakkal and the complainant are natives of the state of Kerala.

Related: Bishop Franco Mulakkal acquitted in alleged rapes of a nun in India

The bishop-elect also comes from Kerala but was ordained a priest in 1991 for the Jalandhar Diocese based in Punjab, the Sikh-dominated northwestern Indian state.

In 2004, Thekkumcherikunnel obtained a licentiate in canon law from the Pontifical Urban University in Rome.

He served the diocese in various roles across parishes and at the diocesan seminary. Additionally, he held the positions of chancellor and judicial vicar of the diocese. In 2022, he was appointed as the financial administrator.

The diocese encompasses 18 districts in Punjab and parts of Himachal Pradesh. According to Vatican News, it has 123,434 Catholics, 214 priests, 897 religious sisters and 147 parishes.

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Punjab is considered a mission diocese with several priests and nuns from Kerala working in the area, which was part of the Belgian Capuchin mission.

It was initially part of the Lahore Diocese. Five years after British rule ended with the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947, the Apostolic Prefecture of Jalandhar was

established on Jan. 17, 1952.

It became a prefecture in 1971, and Capuchin Fr. Symphorian Keeprath was named its first bishop. In 2007, Bishop Anil Joseph Couto succeeded him and continued in this role until he was transferred to become archbishop of Delhi in 2012.

Mulakkal was appointed bishop of Jalandhar in 2013 and led the diocese until he resigned in June 2023.

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