

Leader of Mexican megachurch sentenced in U.S. for child sex abuse

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Naason Joaquin Garcia, the former leader of the evangelical Guadalajara, Mexico-based church La Luz del Mundo, sits during his sentencing in Los Angeles County Superior Court [File: Carolyn Cole/AP Photo]

Los Angeles, June 10 (RHC)-- The head of a Mexico-based megachurch has been sentenced to nearly 17 years in prison in the United States for sexually abusing three girls.

Naason Joaquin Garcia, the leader of the Guadalajara-based evangelical church La Luz del Mundo, had pleaded guilty last week as part of a plea deal to charges of forcible oral sex and performing illegal lewd acts on minors.

The guilty plea came three days before Garcia was set to stand trial on 23 felony counts of sex crimes against children, including multiple charges of rape, conspiracy to engage in human trafficking and child pornography. Prosecutors accused him of using his position of spiritual authority to manipulate his victims.

Garcia, along with a group of church members, groomed girls and young women, telling them they would face eternal damnation if they did not comply with the sexual requests or if they reported the abuse, prosecutors have alleged.

The plea deal, which included prosecutors dropping 16 charges, including numerous counts of raping girls and women, was condemned by the victims, who said in court on Wednesday that they had been robbed of their chance to fully confront Garcia, who is considered an "apostle" by the about five million members of his church.

"We looked up to you, you were our God, and you betrayed us. You are no more than a predator and an abuser," an accuser identified as Jane Doe Number 3 told Garcia, who sat with his back to those who spoke.

An accuser identified as Jane Doe 4 said Garcia used her "over and over again like a sacrificial lamb taken to slaughter."

All of the survivors said they had learned about the plea deal at the last minute only and were not consulted on the negotiations.

Another survivor said Garcia had no remorse for his crimes, alleging he had recently sent a message to church members professing his innocence and proclaiming that he accepted the deal with prosecutors only because he believed he could not get a fair trial.

"Your honor, this abuser thinks your courtroom is a joke. Even after he accepted the plea deal, he's sending messages to the church that he's innocent," the accuser said.

For his part, Judge Ronald Coen said his hands were tied by the deal as he handed down the sentence recommended by prosecutors. "I never cease to be amazed at what people do in the name of religion and how many lives are ruined in the guise of a supreme being," Coen said.

The conviction caps an investigation that began in 2018. The following year, authorities arrested Garcia at Los Angeles International Airport along with a co-defendant, Susana Medina Oaxaca. She pleaded guilty last Friday to a charge of assault likely to cause great bodily harm.

A second co-defendant, Alondra Ocampo, also arrested in 2019, pleaded guilty in 2020 to three felony counts of contact with a minor for purposes of committing a sexual offence and one count of forcible sexual penetration. She had previously faced multiple counts of human trafficking and other charges. A fourth person charged in the investigation, Azalea Rangel Melendez, remained at large.

When a Los Angeles judge ordered Garcia to stand trial in August 2020, the church issued a statement defending their leader as wrongly accused and saying the charges against him stemmed from "unsubstantiated anonymous allegations" and "blatant hearsay." The church has not since responded to the allegations.

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