

CALIFORNIA

## Sex-abuse case against leader of Mexican megachurch ordered dismissed



Naason Joaquin Garcia, the leader of the Guadalajara-based La Luz del Mundo church, listens to a court

interpreter as he appears in Los Angeles County Superior Court in June. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

By LEILA MILLER | STAFF WRITER

APRIL 7, 2020 | 3:08 PM **UPDATED** APRIL 7, 2020 | 10:07 PM

The criminal case against the leader of a Mexico-based megachurch on charges that included child rape and human trafficking was ordered dismissed Tuesday by a California appeals court on procedural grounds — a decision that will resound heavily with church followers worldwide who have maintained their leader's innocence.

Naason Joaquin Garcia, known among La Luz del Mundo's members as the "apostle" of Jesus Christ, had been in custody since June following his arrest on accusations involving three minors and one adult between 2015 and 2018 in Los Angeles County, with counts that took place in 2019 later added.

He had denied wrongdoing and was held without bail in Los Angeles.

While in jail, he had remained the spiritual leader of La Luz del Mundo, which is Spanish for "The Light of the World." Garcia's arrest sparked emergency prayer services throughout the congregations of his Guadalajara-based church that has claimed more than 5 million followers worldwide. Since then, the organization, which was founded by Garcia's grandfather, had continued to support the apostle.

The appeals court ruled that because Garcia's preliminary hearing was not held in a timely manner and he did not waive his right to one after an amended complaint, the complaint filed against him must be dismissed.

"This is a long overdue recognition that the government has violated Mr. Garcia's constitutional right to a speedy trial and reasonable bond," Alan Jackson, Garcia's attorney, said in a statement. "In their zeal to secure a conviction at any cost, the attorney general has sought to strip Mr. Garcia of his freedom without due process by locking him up without bail on the basis of unsubstantiated accusations by unnamed accusers and by denying him his day in court."

It was not clear when Garcia would be released. The attorney general's office said it was reviewing the court's ruling. The agency has the ability to re-file charges against Garcia.

The appeals court ruling states that the Los Angeles County Superior Court must dismiss more than two dozen felony charges that range from human trafficking and production of child pornography to forcible rape of a minor. It was not immediately clear how the case of his co-defendants, Susana Medina Oaxaca and Alondra Ocampo, would be affected. A fourth defendant, Azalea Rangel Melendez, remains at large.

**SPONSORED CONTENT**

**Tell us what you like, find a car you'll love —  
shop Cars.com now!**

By Cars.com

Search over 4.9 Million listings to find your perfect car match today at Cars.com!

ADVERTISEMENT

The case came as a result of a tip to a Justice Department website that was created to help people report abuse by clergy. Prosecutors have described how women allegedly helped procure and

prepare young girls for Garcia's pleasure. They have said that the victims were told that if they went against any of Garcia's desires or wishes as "the apostle" they were going against God. Garcia's defense team has disputed that account.

Ocampo had been accused of being the "groomer and recruiter" of the young women who were allegedly sexually assaulted by Garcia. Prosecutors have said that Oaxaca was Garcia's assistant.

In a 2019 hearing, a witness for prosecutors testified that pornography had been found on digital devices that had been seized from Garcia. A state law enforcement officer and forensic examiner had testified that a video on an iPad depicts the defendant having intercourse with a woman while she performs oral sex on an underage male. The officer also said that a video found on an iPhone shows four females "of a very young age" lying nude on a bed performing oral sex on one another.

Garcia's legal team at the time had said that the officer had inadequately relied on a Jane Doe witness to identify one of the people in the alleged threesome — who wore a mask — as an underage male.

In February, a Southern California woman who is a former member of La Luz del Mundo filed a federal lawsuit against the church and Garcia. The civil complaint, which names La Luz del Mundo, Garcia and a dozen other high-ranking church members, seeks damages for involuntary servitude, forced and unpaid labor, human trafficking, racketeering and sexual battery. The church has denied the allegations in the lawsuit.

In a statement following the appellate court decision, the church invited congregants to give thanks to God at home in a special consecration.

"Let us be prudent, and wait on legal proceedings, trusting that the awaited day will come, because the church is confident in the honorability of the Apostle of Jesus Christ," officials said in the release.

Parishioners celebrated the court decision. Upon hearing the news, Alma M. Schutt, a member of the church who lives in San Antonio, was momentarily speechless.

ADVERTISEMENT

"Oh my goodness, praise God," she said. "That's wonderful news. It just seemed so unfair for him to be there."

Schutt has been part of the church since she was a little girl, which she said had made it very difficult for her to believe the accusations against Garcia.

"He was being punished — it was a great injustice," she said. "I'm so happy. It makes me want to cry."

Robert Pelegreen, a retired military officer and a member of the church who also lives in San Antonio, said justice had come after the media had "dragged the reputation of the church in the mud."

The arrest of the apostle had furthered tensions between many former church members and their families. As the church had aggressively backed Garcia, former parishioners had wrestled with the news of his arrest. Many had said they had felt validated in their decision to leave the faith.

A 25-year-old former youth minister of the church who lives in Los Angeles said he was concerned that the church would use the court decision as evidence of the so-called apostle's innocence.

"I'm worried that the church will perceive it as he's innocent and they couldn't find anything against him," said the former member, who did not want to be identified because he feared backlash.

"Members of the church are so entrenched in their belief that they're going to make this a victory and won't see it any other way."