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Former music minister gets sex crime term

BYLINE: By, James Shea

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jshea@citizen-times.com

ASHEVILLE - A former music minister at St. Eugene Catholic Church was sentenced to 28 years in federal prison by a U.S. District Court judge.

Paul Lawrence Berrell, 31, pleaded guilty to one count of production of child pornography on March 11, 2010. Besides the jail term, Berrell was ordered to pay \$2,442 in restitution Monday and register as a sex offender.

Asheville police arrested Berrell in 2009 after the parent of a minor female notified authorities of inappropriate behavior. Authorities seized a camera, computer and about 11 CDs of child erotica.

"Berrell produced child pornography by coercing a minor to engage in sexually explicit conduct," according to court documents.

He was accused of numerous sex-related offenses and was charged with nine counts of second-degree sexual exploitation of a minor, two counts of indecent liberties with a child and one count of statutory sex offense.

Berrell was charged in federal court in early 2010.

The court found Berrell "engaged in a pattern of sexual abuse against minor children dating back to 2002 while employed as a music teacher."

During the investigation, law enforcement determined that the Rev. John Schneider, then pastor at St. Eugene, had deleted hundreds of child pornographic images from Berrell's computer, in an attempt to cover up criminal activity, according to court documents.

Schneider was charged with one count of obstruction of justice. His next court date is April 11 in Superior Court.

A minor girl and her parents filed a lawsuit against Berrell, Schneider and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charlotte in July.

The suit claims church officials knew about a pattern of improper sexual activity by Berrell.

Berrell has been in local custody but will be transferred to a federal prison. Federal prison sentences do not allow any opportunity for parole.

A call placed to Berrell's attorney was not returned.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Charlotte offered to issue a statement on the case, but no statement was received by the Citizen-Times.

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