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Shadowy Russian Clergyman Stripped of Priesthood After Virus Denials, Monastery Capture

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Father Sergei seized a women's monastery after he'd been banned from preaching and called coronavirus restrictions a "satanic plot." **Screenshot Youtube**

An ultraconservative, coronavirus-denying priest who captured a women's monastery in central Russia last month has been defrocked by an ecclesiastical court, Interfax reported Friday.

Father Sergei seized the Sredneuralsk women's monastery near Yekaterinburg after religious authorities barred him from preaching in April for refusing to follow health guidelines due to the Covid-19 outbreak, calling the restrictions a "satanic plot."

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The Yekaterinburg diocese found Father Sergei guilty of violating his monastic vows and ruled to defrock him, Interfax quoted Archpriest Nikolai Maleta as saying to reporters.

The ruling is irreversible and means that Father Sergei will not be able to regain his status, diocese spokesman Maxim Minyailo was quoted as saying.

The diocese has sent its ruling to Patriarch Kirill, the leader of Russia's Orthodox Church.

Father Sergei did not attend the last two of the diocese's three trials. During the court's first session, Father Sergei accused Patriarch Kirill of betraying the faith for closing churches during the coronavirus pandemic.

The priest's supporters gathered outside the church where the trial took place, saying they will not give up the captured monastery.

A former policeman, Father Sergei changed his secular name to Nikolai Romanov in honor of Russia's last emperor and previously spent 13 years in prison for murder.

He is known as the former confessor of several public figures including Russian lawmaker and former Crimean prosecutor Natalia Poklonskaya. Following the monastery capture, Poklonskaya denied that Father Sergei is her current confessor and declined to comment on the incident further.

A BBC Russia report published earlier Friday described the abusive treatment of children living in the monastery.

Monasteries across Russia have been beset by Covid-19 cases amid Russia's outbreak.

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