

Brazil Looks for Rapist Who Strangled 1-Year-Old Girl Inside Church

Contributed by Elma Lia Nascimento
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The Brazilian police have already interrogated without success over 20 people in connection with the murder of a one-and-a-half-year-old girl, who was raped, strangled and then thrown inside the baptismal basin of an Adventist church in the city of Joinville, in the southern state of Santa Catarina, last Saturday, March 3.

The latest person to be questioned by the authorities, a 23-year-old man, with signs of mental illness, was let go after presenting a convincing alibi. He had been presented by a pastor from the church as a suspect for having killed little Gabrielli Cristina Eichholz.

For Rodrigo Bueno Busso, the police chief in charge of the Gabrielli investigation, the crime was premeditated. Without saying how he arrived to this conclusion, Busso stated: "When the assassin picked up the victim, he certainly had already thought about taking her to the men's bathroom and then leaving her in the baptismal tank."

The toddler had been taken by relatives to the Saturday's services and left in a room to play with other children who were being overseen by church's employees.

After meeting with church's officials and those who participated in the Saturday prayers, Busso told reporters that his probe is just starting: "We are working on several avenues of investigation and have some probable suspects, but it's still too early to point the finger at anyone," said the police chief.

Among those heard by the investigator was the woman monitoring the room where little Gabrielli was left. She was the one who gave the girl to a man who showed up saying he was her father. The lady's testimony has been kept secret by the police. The coroner's office report shows that the child was raped and strangled.

Felipe Lemos, a church spokesman says all parishioners are extremely mortified: "Everybody is in shock. Nothing like that ever happened in any of our churches all around the world."

Gabrielli's mother, Andréia Pereira Eichholz says that she feels no hatred in her heart: "I can't understand how something like that could happen inside a church. I want to know who grabbed my daughter. I don't feel any anger or hate. I just want to understand why."

"I have no more tears," she told Joinville's newspaper, A Notícia. "They dried up. I prefer to think that my daughter drowned. It hurts less. She was a sweet girl, always smiling. Everyone was drawn to her beauty."

The mother says she allowed Gabrielli to go with her cousin and her boyfriend because the girl loved to be with them. Both have been living with Gabrielli's parents for four months. Saturday when they were leaving to the church - Andréia goes to another evangelical church, the Assembly of God - the girl started to cry wanting to go with them. The mother saw no problem.

Yesterday morning, Márcia Machado, the cousin and her boyfriend, cried while looking at pictures of the girl. "She was going to stay with us during the services," said Márcia. "But one of teachers asked to take her to the playing room and we authorized it."

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Santa Catarina released a note, in which it laments the assassination of the little girl. The statement says that the church is also, like the toddler, a victim of the crime and that they are on the side of the police and the Justice in the investigations.

"The Seventh-Day Adventist Church makes it public in view of the unfortunate episode occurred inside a congregation in Joinville, last Saturday, that it vehemently repudiates this horrendous act that victimized the child.

"We are well-known for preaching against violence and in favor of Christian values, among which the appreciation for family values and respect for children. We profoundly regret what happened and join the bereaved family, doing from the moment we heard about the fact all that's within our reach to lessen the pain and the sorrow.

"We stress that, under the terms of the Brazilian Constitution, Adventist temples are open to the public and that the Church has no intention of assuming the role of public security organs, but lamentably, from all available evidence, was victim of a criminal in this episode. And in this condition of victim of a barbaric act, the Church is on the side of the police and the Justice hoping for a complete elucidation of the case.

"We make it clear that the crime occurred without our knowledge and that we are cooperating in every which way we can since the crime was discovered.

"In closing, we point out that at this time all of the Church's members who are aware of the fact are concentrating their prayers to the Heavenly Father in favor of the victim's relatives."