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Saturday, March 04, 2006

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Pastor gets 15 to life for molesting two girls

Victim's brother found images on defendant's camera phone.

Were it not for the suspicions of a protective brother, former pastor Donald Domelle might still be molesting a teenage girl, rather than making his way to prison.

Domelle, former pastor of the Baptist Temple of Salinas, was sentenced to 15 years to life in prison on Thursday for molesting two girls, one of whom left the area to escape him.

Domelle, 65, was arrested after the brother of the second victim, a developmentally delayed teenager, followed the pastor and his sister and observed Domelle taking photographs of her. The boy later checked Domelle's camera phone and found what prosecutor Gary Thelander described as pornographic digital images of his sister.

Like many in the congregation, the boy's mother was at first reluctant to believe the news, and Domelle at first denied knowledge of the photos. He later admitted that he had carried on a sexual relationship with the girl when she was 14 and 15 years old, in her home, his van and in the church.

He admitted a sexual relationship with another teenage girl in the congregation, whom he started molesting when she was 6.

In court Thursday, Thelander read an emotional letter from the mother of the developmentally delayed girl, detailing how the molestation had devastated her entire family.

The mother said she'd known "Pastor" since she was 12 years old, and that he had acted as a grandfather to her children. Since the molestation, she said, her daughter, who is now 16 but has the mental maturity of a 6-year-old, has been acting out sexually, is rebellious and will not communicate with her mother.

Her 14-year-old son -- who set out to protect his sister and ended up witnessing some of Domelle's acts -- has turned to gangs for a sense of "belonging," she said. And her older daughters, now in their 20s, are afraid to leave home because they are afraid to trust others.

While she wishes her daughters could go out and experience life, she said, she understands how they feel.

"I trusted (Domelle) and didn't realize that the one person who I needed to protect my children from was the one person who I believed was helping me protect them from others just like him."

Standing with his hands and feet shackled, Domelle said he had "shamed" his family and his victim, as well as the church that he served for 44 years.

"I am, in my heart, very sorry for what happened," he said.

Judge Scott told Domelle that his apology "cannot repay the victims for what you've stolen from them." The price Domelle would pay, he said, was life in prison. Domelle will be 80 before he can apply for parole.

Despite Domelle's admission and apology, some in the crowded courtroom refused to believe Domelle's guilt.

Tina Pitt said Domelle had been her "foster father" since she was 6 years old and her children had been around him since they were born. None of them, she said, was ever harmed.

"I would suspect my own father before I would have suspected him," she said, adding that there was more to the story than was being told.

Thelander said he hoped Domelle's admission would help the community reach some "closure" and belief of the charges.

He said the girl that Domelle had molested since childhood told her mother and people in the congregation about the molestation and was sent away to a school in Texas to "correct her behavior."



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Thelander cautioned parents to let the case be a warning.

"In the vast majority of these cases, the perpetrator is not a stranger, it's someone in your midst -- a father, a neighbor, a pastor," he said. "When children come and say these things, something out of the norm that a person doesn't want to believe, parents should follow up."

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