

PRESS  
11-28-94

# Priest's arrest shocks Haitian community

■ The Rev. Jean Level Eliscard, arrested as he attempted to return to Haiti, is accused of criminal sexual contact with a teenage parishioner.

Associated Press

TRENTON — In three months as a visiting Roman Catholic priest here, the Rev. Jean Level Eliscard won the instant admiration of hundreds of Haitian parishioners, a church official said Sunday.

Those same parishioners, albeit shocked, are wholeheartedly supporting the Trenton Diocese's decision to openly discuss sex charges filed Saturday against the 28-year-old Haitian citizen, said Monsignor John Dermond.

Eliscard, arrested as he attempted to return to Haiti, is accused of criminal sexual contact with a teenage parishioner.

"This man wasn't here long, but he's a very warm, loving, kindly, open person and they took to him instantly," Dermond,

pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Church here, said Sunday.

"They feel very hurt that he's been charged with this. I don't know how to express it in words. It's as if he had been around a long time and they knew him very well."



ELISCARD

Eliscard was arraigned and waived an extradition hearing early Sunday in Queens Criminal Court in New York, where he was being held following his arrest, said Mary de Bourbon, spokeswoman with the district attorney's office.

New Jersey authorities planned to pick him up some time today, de Bourbon said.

Paul Lettis, a senior court clerk at Queens Criminal Court, said Eliscard was charged with aggravated criminal sexual contact, degrading the morals of a child and endangering the wel-

□ See **Haitian**, Page A5

FROM PAGE A1

# Haitian: Community stunned by priest's arrest

(Continued from Page A1)

fare of a child.

Eliscard was arrested Saturday morning at John F. Kennedy International Airport, less than an hour before the departure of an American Airlines flight to Haiti that he had "hastily arranged," authorities have said.

Police in Hamilton Township, Mercer County, believe Eliscard had caught wind of an investigation launched a day earlier into the molestation of a 13-year-old girl and was trying to flee the country.

Eliscard was on vacation in the United States when an embargo against Haiti prevented him from returning, said Dermond.

During his stay, he performed his ministry at parishes in Brooklyn, Los Angeles and Canada.

In August, Eliscard arrived in

Trenton as a visiting priest, celebrating Sunday masses here and in Asbury Park that were tailored for Haitian Catholics whose native tongues are Creole and French, said Dermond.

Eliscard has been suspended pending the outcome of the investigation.

A Haitian parishioner called Dermond Saturday morning with a tip that helped authorities track down Eliscard at the New York airport.

Since the girl's father approached him with the allegations Friday, Dermond has been in close contact with police and has freely offered public statements as the case unfolded — an admittedly unusual procedure.

Dermond reiterated that policy during regular Sunday Masses and planned to send the same message out during an evening Mass open to the more than 300 members of the Diocesan Haitian Center here.

"I acted immediately as directed by our diocesan guidelines and by state law," Dermond said.

"With my bishop's approval, I've chosen to be up front about this. Instead of saying, 'No comment,' we'll try to provide as much cooperation as we can to the media" and civil authorities, Dermond said.

The Haitian community was "taking it especially hard," but supported the diocese's decision to speak publicly as the case unfolds.

"So far, the reaction of our people here in the parish has been that we did the right thing," said Dermond. "I don't have anybody in the parish saying we should have kept it quiet."

The diocese chose this path to get the truth out, avoid a "cloud of suspicion," and show the church is also concerned about the victim, he said.

"We don't tolerate our clergy abusing (people)," Dermond said, adding that by the same token, "we don't tolerate false accusations."

The alleged incident happened inside the teenage girl's home on Sept. 27, according to Hamilton police Lt. Kevin Pollard.

Pollard said Eliscard visited the teenager when she was home alone and began to molest her, but the act was interrupted when her father came home.

The priest left and the girl's father, described as a devout Catholic, took no action until Eliscard came back unannounced two weeks later, Pollard said.