

Priest pleads guilty to hindering burglary probe

BAY MINETTE — A Roman Catholic priest pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of hindering the investigation into stolen property from a Greek Orthodox church and received a suspended jail term.

Monsignor Thomas J. Cullen, 65, pastor of Christ the King Church in Andalusia, entered his plea Thursday in Baldwin County.

He was charged with hindering the probe into the theft of an icon from the Greek Orthodox Church in Malbis last October.

A circuit judge gave Cullen a six-month suspended jail term and two years' unsupervised probation. He also must cooperate with police in

the investigation of the church burglary and pay \$25 to the Alabama Crime Victims' Compensation Fund.

"We don't believe Father Cullen was involved in the burglary of the church. We believe he made a terrible mistake of judgment involving the item taken from the Greek church," said District Attorney David Whetstone in Bay Minette.

"He knew where it was, who had it and he failed to disclose it to authorities," Whetstone said. "Father Cullen made a major mistake in judgment, then compounded it by not notifying authorities."

Another suspect, Randy Early, is accused of burglarizing the church

and stealing an icon and other items. At some point, Whetstone said, the icon was taken to Andalusia, where Cullen now lives, and he knew it had been stolen.

Early, 38, of Mobile, has not yet been tried on theft and burglary charges. A third suspect in the case, Carl "Mickey" Lostracco, 23, of Daphne, pleaded guilty to the same charges and was sentenced to 10 years in prison last month.

Whetstone said more arrests are expected and additional information will be released when possible.

"His Cullen's motives someday will be told sometime during this investigation," Whetstone said.

Archbishop Oscar H. Lipscomb of Mobile said he had apologized to the Greek Orthodox Church that suffered the theft and offered to make restitution for "the loss of a most sacred symbol to their faith."

"It is with deep regret that I have learned of the mistake Monsignor T.J. Cullen made that has resulted in his having formally been charged with the misdemeanor of hindering a criminal investigation," Lipscomb said. "He has admitted this error in court and is currently complying with its judgment."

HAY RIDES