

Not guilty pleas entered by priest

Rev. Jean-Level Eliscard is accused of molesting a 13-year-old girl. The judge set bail at \$75,000.

By Marjorie Valbrun
PHILADELPHIA TRIBUNE BUREAU

TRENTON — After listening to a graphic account of a local priest's alleged molestation of a 13-year-old girl and a later attempt to flee the county, a Mercer County judge yesterday set bail for the priest at \$75,000 and ordered him to stay away from the child and her family if he is released.

Judge Thomas DeMartin also ordered the Rev. Jean-Level Eliscard, a popular visiting priest at St. Francis of Assisi Church in downtown Trenton, to surrender his passport and all other travel documents.

Father Eliscard, 36, sat silently during the afternoon hearing, at which his attorney entered not guilty pleas to charges of aggravated attempted sexual assault, aggravated criminal sexual contact, child abuse, and endangering the welfare of a child.

Supporters of the priest who filled two rows inside the courtroom winced as Assistant Prosecutor Loni Hand recounted the alleged attack. "It's all made up," Marlene Saint-Juste said afterward. "We are 100 percent behind him."

"I don't believe it," Ketiene Massenet said of the prosecutor's statement. "She fabricated this story."

Hand's statements were the first to offer a glimpse of the official version of the unidentified family's allegations.

Hand gave this account: Around 6:30 on the evening of Sept. 27, Father Eliscard — as he had done on a number of occasions — called the girl's home in Hamilton Township to speak to the girl's 5-year-old sister.

The girl, who was home alone, informed the priest that her sister was out with her parents.

The priest responded that he would come over and await them, and a few minutes later he showed up at the family's apartment door.

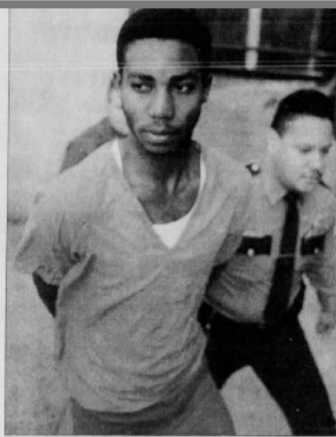
Father Eliscard asked the girl to show him the phones inside the house that her younger sister used when talking with him. The girl showed him the phone in the kitchen and then the one in her parents' bedroom. Then the priest sat on the parents' bed, asked the girl to sit next to him, and molested her.

When the girl's father returned home around 6:50 p.m., he noticed the television set was on, but his daughter was not watching.

After hearing crying sounds coming from his bedroom, he went to the bedroom and found the defendant on top of the victim with her hands pinned over her head. Hand said, "Her dress was pulled up, and he was trying to pull down her panties."

Hand said that Father Eliscard begged the father not to tell authorities and left the home. Two weeks later, Hand said, Father Eliscard returned to the house — presumably to

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The Sunbeam / TOM KELLY

Rev. Jean-Level Eliscard is led into Mercer County Jail after his arraignment. Many parishioners attended the hearing in his support.

Accused priest pleads not guilty to charges

PRIEST from 51 see the 15-year-old girl — and promptly left when he learned the child's mother was at home. It was then that the child's father told the mother about the earlier incident, and together they decided to go to church officials last Friday. Church officials in turn called police.

Father Eliscard heard that charges were pending, Hand said, so he decided to flee the country. He first asked a parishioner to drive him to Canada and then changed his mind and had her drive him to the airport instead.

He was arrested on Saturday at the John F. Kennedy International Airport after the parishioner called church officials and told them where to find the priest. When he was apprehended, he was in possession of an airline ticket to Haiti, his native country, police said.

Since August, Father Eliscard was a visiting priest at St. Francis of Assisi, where he said Mass in Haitian Creole and ministered to the church's growing Haitian community. He was also involved with the Holy Spirit Church in Asbury Park.

He had been stranded in the United States when all international flights to Haiti were halted as part of an international economic embargo against the island nation. Parishioners said Father Eliscard planned to go to Haiti in January to seek permission from his home diocese to return to Trenton and minister in the area.

Father Eliscard's arrest has rocked the city's Haitian community, which had embraced him as one of its own. Since he joined the church, attendance by Haitian parishioners had jumped from 50 to 175.

"It's a question of culture," Saint-Juste said in trying to explain why Father Eliscard went to his accusers' home. "This is our way of doing things in Haiti. The priests go from house to house to preach, to minister to the sick and old, to encourage people to come to church."

But the very public manner of the arrest and the proceedings thus far — unheard of in Haiti — also contributed to the community's outrage, which has been voiced strongly on Haitian radio stations here.

Local newspapers have covered Father Eliscard's arrest extensively, and television images of the priest in handcuffs have been beamed from New York to Miami and even to Canada.

"In Haiti, when we have a problem, we handle it together, among ourselves," Saint-Juste said.