

Priest's sex charges shock Haitian enclave

■ In three-month visit, he won admiration of community.

TRENTON (AP) — 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 Msgr. John Dermond. Eliscard, arrested as he attempted to return to Haiti, is accused of criminal sexual contact with a teen-age 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, told The Associated Press 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."

Arraigned Sunday

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 on Monday, de Bourbon said.

Paul Lettis, a senior court clerk at Queens Criminal Court, said Eliscard was charged with aggravated criminal sexual contact, degrading the

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morals of a child and endangering the welfare 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.

On vacation

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.

Policy repeated

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 told The AP. "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.

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



Associated Press photo

The same parishioners who admired the Rev. Jean Level Eliscard, are wholeheartedly supporting the Trenton Diocese's decision to openly discuss sex charges filed against the Haitian citizen.

"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."