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PRIEST 'GIRL ABUSE': INDICTED IN BROOKLYN FONDLING

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A Manhattan Catholic priest was indicted yesterday on charges he sexually abused a 12-year-old girl in her Brooklyn home, after saying he was there to visit her ailing grandmother.

The Rev. Francis Nelson, 38, of St. Charles Borromeo Church in Hamilton Heights, fondled the girl's breasts and pressed his genitals into her buttocks on a visit in May 1999, authorities said.

At the time, Nelson, who's from the diocese of Kattar, India, was a visiting priest at St. Mary's Star of the Sea Church in Brooklyn Heights.

Nelson, who worked at the church for three years, "came to visit the girl in her home saying he wanted to see her sick grandmother," Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes said.

"While at the house, he pulled the child onto his lap, placed his hands under her bra and fondled her breasts. He also rubbed his penis against her buttocks," Assistant DA Rhonnie Jaus said yesterday at his arraignment in Brooklyn Supreme Court.

Nelson's name and a description of the alleged abuse were part of material on pedophile priest suspects turned over to Hynes' office by the Brooklyn Diocese last month. Immediately after the incident, the girl told her mother, who then reported it to the diocese.

After an investigation, the diocese asked Nelson to leave "because it questioned the credibility of his denial," said spokesman Frank DeRosa.

On July 21, 1999, Brooklyn Bishop Thomas Daily communicated the decision directly to Bishop Leon Tharmaraj, Nelson's bishop in India, who agreed to the removal, said DeRosa.

Soon after, unknown to the Brooklyn Diocese, Tharmaraj worked out a deal with the New York Diocese for Nelson to work as a visiting priest at St. Charles, while taking graduate classes at Fordham University.

Generally, a priest's home bishop - in this case, Tharmaraj - would be responsible for disclosing any problems.

But New York Archdiocese spokesman Joseph Zwilling said they only became aware of the accusation on Wednesday.

However, DeRosa insisted the diocese knew about the sexual abuse accusations, saying they had exchanged "communications."

"They were aware that there was an allegation," he said. Calls to Nelson's Indian diocese were not returned. Nelson surrendered yesterday morning at his church's rectory.

The priest, who has been charged with two counts of second-degree sexual abuse and endangering the welfare of a child, was released on his own recognizance after surrendering his passport.

"As a result of this complaint, he will no longer be permitted to function as a priest in the Archdiocese of New York," Zwilling said.