

Priest enters pre-trial program to void sex contact charges

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BRIDGETON — A Vineland priest charged with having sexual contact with two teen-age boys has received preliminary approval to enter a program that would allow him to avoid trial.

The Rev. Edward Gillespie, a Roman Catholic priest on a leave of absence from St. Isidore's Church and Sacred Heart High School, has been approved by the county probation department for acceptance into the county's pre-trial intervention program.

Before final acceptance into the program, Cumberland County Prosecutor Steven Neder and then a Superior Court judge must approve Gillespie's application.

The application has not yet been signed by Neder. The prosecutor could not be reached for comment.

The terms called for under Gillespie's applica-

tion will not be known until they are approved by a judge.

Generally, applicants are required to undergo some sort of rehabilitation, usually psychological consultation.

When an applicant is approved for pre-trial intervention, charges are postponed for a six-month period while the applicant completes the terms of the contractual agreement with the court. After six months, the applicant is reviewed for compliance and, if needed, a judge may extend participation six more months. If the applicant successfully completes the terms of the agreement, charges are dropped.

Investigators consider the applicant's background, including any prior criminal convictions before approving acceptance to the pre-trial intervention program.

In January, Gillespie, 39, was charged with two counts of sexual contact. Under New Jersey crimi-

nal code, "sexual contact" is defined as touching another person for sexual gratification.

Sources close to the investigation said the alleged incidents occurred in Gillespie's quarters at St. Isidore rectory. The first in December 1986 involved a 15-year-old boy and the second in December 1987 reportedly involved a 17-year-old boy.

Both incidents allegedly occurred after Gillespie returned from the annual Sea Gull Basketball Tournament in Atlantic City with one or more of the youths, according to police sources.

After Gillespie was arrested and charged by Vineland Police, the Diocese of Camden gave him a year's leave of absence.

According to Vineland Police, the investigation began at the direction of the prosecutor's office.

The family of one of the alleged victims contacted the diocese, which contacted the state Department of Youth and Family Services, which in turn called the prosecutor, according to reports.