

Montpelier Priest Cleared Of Eden Youth's Charges

By MIKE DONOGHUE

Free Press Staff Writer

The Rev. Richard E. Thompson of St. Augustine's Catholic Church in Montpelier has been cleared of allegations of lewd and lascivious conduct and kidnapping in connection with an alleged abduction in Stowe Aug. 23.

"I don't believe charges are warranted or justified," acting Lamoille County State's Attorney Christopher Leopold said Saturday.

Charges of unlawful mischief and leaving the scene of an accident also will not be brought, he said.

Bruce Wescom, 19, of Eden, who had filed the complaint against the priest, has admitted he was drinking liquor and smoking marijuana the night of the alleged incident, Leopold said.

Possible charges of false information to police against Wescom also are not justified, Leopold said. Wescom, a carpenter, remains confused about the incident, Leopold said.

Thompson, 40, had maintained his innocence. He said Saturday he is thankful that the case is closed. Thompson had been out of the state, but returned because his mother has been admitted to the intensive care unit of Rutland Hospital with a heart attack, officials said.

Oreste V. Valsangiacomo, the attorney who represented Thompson, said he was bothered by the inconsistencies in Wescom's statements.

Wescom initially said the priest had a .44-caliber Magnum handgun, later said he thought the priest had a gun, and finally admitted there was no gun, Valsangiacomo said.

Stowe police had ordered Thompson to appear in Vermont District Court Sept. 22 to face the four charges.

Leopold agreed to postpone the arraignment until the police could check information uncovered by Howard Fitzpatrick, a private detective hired by the priest.

Stow Chief George K. Hurst said that while the initial information appeared to justify the charges, the additional check revealed inconsistencies in Wescom's statements.

Hurst said he is satisfied with the decision to drop charges.

Leopold said he interviewed Wescom for about an hour two weeks ago. The prosecutor said he was not satisfied with the allegations, but offered Wescom additional time to see if he could remember anything more. When Wescom could not offer any more information, Leopold said he decided there was no basis for a

complaint.

Leopold said he is still not sure why Wescom got into the priest's car outside the Baggy Knees, a Stowe bar on the Mountain Road.

Wescom had told police he had been forced out of the bar by a man who said he had a gun. Three of Wescom's friends saw Wescom get into the car and followed it to the Hadleigh House on Vermont 100, officials said. Wescom claimed the man fondled his thigh and told him to take off his pants, police said.

Wescom's friends arrived and pulled him from the car, police said. The man then backed his car into theirs and tore up the lawn as he drove away, police said.

The case was reported immediately to police and a few minutes later, about 3 a.m., the vehicle, with Thompson driving, was stopped on Interstate 89 north of the Middlesex exit by Waterbury, Stowe and state police.

Thompson, who was wearing civilian clothes, was described as "cooperative" by Stowe Patrolman Kenneth Kaplan. Thompson was taken to the nearby state police barracks, issued a court citation and released to the custody of then-Deputy Attorney General Gregory McKenzie, a member of the priest's parish.

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A second priest in the car, the Rev. John Hergenrother of Chicago, was "semi-passed out during the whole thing," Kaplan said. He was released without a citation after being questioned.

Hurst said statements made by Wescom's friends were based on what they thought they saw or perceived and also on what Wescom had told them. Hurst said some of the details, such as Wescom's being in the car and the chase, are not disputed.

The Rev. Joseph Campbell, pastor of St. Augustine's, said after the incident that Thompson had been "crushed" by the incident. "He can't believe it," Campbell said at the time.

Campbell said parishioners were supportive of Thompson and said legal assistance would be provided for the priest, who had been in the capital city for three years.

Thompson was ordained 13 years ago and had served in Bennington, Burlington and Middletown Springs before going to Montpelier.