

Priest said he was too 'sympathetic'

By Sabina A. Sims
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The Rev. Jonathan Franklin, who killed himself three days before he was to go on trial in Escambia County charged with molesting an altar boy, had been shifted from parish to parish during his 30-year career because he was often "overly sympathetic to children in bad situations," he said in a letter received Monday by the State Attorney's Office in Pensacola.

"A number of times, I have been accused of showing too much affection to young children, hugging and kissing, but never have I been accused of impure touches or fondling," Franklin said in a letter to State Attorney Curtis Golden.

"One psychiatric evaluation, around 1959,"

Franklin wrote, "mentioned that I was 'overly sympathetic to children in bad situations.'"

The priest, who had lived 11 years at the abbey 50 miles north of Birmingham, was charged with committing a lewd and lascivious act on a boy, now 13, last summer while Franklin was living at Pensacola's St. Anne's Catholic Church, on Saufley Field Road.

In March, the boy told Sheriff's Department investigators that Franklin fondled him while he was trying on a bathing suit at a department store and performed oral sex on him while he was taking a shower, according to sheriff's records. But during a deposition, the boy recanted his allegations, saying Franklin never molested him, according to Assistant

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Letter found after priest's suicide

LETTER/from 1A

Attorney Randy Hensel:

Franklin was to stand trial this week in Escambia County Circuit Criminal Court.

His body was found Friday on the grounds of the St. Bernard Abbey in Cullman, Ala., with a shotgun wound to his head. According to a police report, the wound was self-inflicted.

The police report said Franklin, 61, bought the 12-gauge shotgun Thursday. He told the clerk he was buying it as a gift.

Franklin left several notes before his death Friday, including the one to Golden. It was dated July 2, nearly a month before his death. Cullman police mailed it after going through Franklin's personal belongings after his death.

"In 1980, I was assigned to a parish, St. Ann's, Decatur, Ala., and when I had completed about 11 months there, I again became in-

involved with a lad whose parents were alcoholics," the letter said. "I realized that the situation was again becoming too hard for me to handle and I requested that I be assigned back to the abbey. I came on my own to the abbey and talked to the superior of the abbey ... about the matter.

"We both agreed that I should not try to handle any parish assignment again on a longtime term. We both knew my weakness and mutually agreed that my best place was at the abbey."

After a disagreement with a superior, Franklin was again transferred, a move with which he disagreed, he wrote.

Officials at the abbey late Monday said they had just attended Franklin's funeral and could not discuss events outlined in his letter.

Hensel, who would have tried to prove to a jury that Franklin was guilty of the Escambia County

charge, said Monday that his case against the priest was weak. Franklin could have been acquitted of charges, he said.

The boy who made the allegations against the priest has an extensive psychiatric history, stemming from child abuse by his mother, Hensel said.

Hensel said his only witnesses in a trial would have been the boy; the boy's grandmother, who brought criminal charges against Franklin, and a sheriff's investigator.

Hensel and defense attorney Barry Beroset had discussed a plea agreement that would have entailed six months probation for Franklin after which the case would have been dismissed.

Franklin and Beroset agreed to that plea bargain, Hensel said, but the boy's grandmother didn't think that punishment was enough. She wanted the case to go to trial, Hensel said.