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Colonia Priest Takes a Leave of Absence

By Kathleen Hopkins
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The Diocese of Metuchen yesterday confirmed that the Rev. John R. Butler, associate pastor of St. John Vianney Church in Colonia, is on a leave of absence stemming from allegations he engaged in "inappropriate conduct with a minor" in a Long Island parish in the late '50s and early '60s.

In a brief statement read to parishioners at Sunday Masses, St. John Vianney's pastor, the Rev. Edward M. O'Neill, said Butler was on a leave of absence because of allegations from 40 years ago. O'Neill did not elaborate and left the altar after asking the congregation to pray for Butler.

O'Neill was unavailable for comment yesterday.

One parishioner, who asked not to be identified, said many in the congregation were shocked, and some started to cry after hearing the announcement. Butler had been in the parish more than 15 years, she said.

The diocese on Friday issued a prepared statement saying one of its priests was on leave because the diocese received allegations he engaged in "inappropriate conduct with a minor." The diocese would not identify the priest or the parish on Friday, but yesterday, diocesan spokeswoman Joanne Ward confirmed it was Butler.

The Metuchen Diocese said someone called with allegations of abuse that took place in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y., between 1958 and 1964. The caller, who the diocese did not identify, said the allegations would be repeated to the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office in New York.

A 50-year-old Brooklyn man said yesterday it was he who brought the allegations to the Metuchen Diocese as well as the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office. The man, whose name the Home News Tribune is withholding, alleged the molestation occurred when he was a choir boy and altar boy at St. Joseph's Church in Kings Park, which is located in Suffolk County on Long Island. The man said Butler was transferred from the parish in 1964. He said he has been making the allegations to church officials since he was a teen-ager, but nobody did anything about them until he recently contacted the Metuchen Diocese.

Metuchen Bishop Paul G. Bootkoski, who was installed as head of the diocese last month, pledged to swiftly handle any allegations of sexual abuse by priests.

Two other priests in the Metuchen Diocese previously have been accused of sexual abuse. One, Michael Santillo, a former pastor at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Perth Amboy, died last year while serving a 10-year prison term at the Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center in Avenel. The Rev. John Banko, 55, former pastor at St. Edward the Confessor in Milford, is facing trial on child sexual assault charges in Superior Court in Flemington.

The Metuchen Diocese encompasses Middlesex., Somerset, Hunterdon and Warren counties.