

8-18-08 - Cape priest flees to Brazil after child sex allegation
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BARNSTABLE — A Brazilian priest who celebrated Mass at St. Francis Xavier Church in Hyannis and other Cape churches has fled the country after being accused of sexual assault of a minor in Connecticut.

The Rev. Jose Afonso Lima was placed on temporary leave Wednesday after the allegation came to light, Catholic Diocese of Fall River spokesman John Kearns said today.

“At this point, we don’t know all that much,” Kearns said of the investigation. Lima has denied the allegation, Kearns said.

Fall River Bishop George W. Coleman informed parishioners of Lima’s suspension in a letter distributed during weekend Masses at Brazilian churches on the Cape and in Fall River and at St. Pius X Parish in South Yarmouth.

“I am deeply troubled by this matter and understand how devastating the announcement of it is to the Brazilian community and to the St. Pius X Parish community,” Coleman wrote in his letter. “I wish to assure all of you of my prayers at this difficult time. I ask that you remember Father Lima and the individual who has brought forth this accusation in your prayers.”

Lima was a priest in residence on the St. Pius X, but his main ministry was at St. Francis Xavier Church, where he ministered Brazilian Catholics, the Rev. George Bellenoit at St. Pius X said today.

Bellenoit, who has been at St. Pius for the past two years, said he did not work with Lima but knew him to be a “gentleman.”
“He was certainly somebody who was dedicated to his ministry and the people he ministered to,” he said.

People at St. Pius who knew Lima were shocked and saddened by the news delivered this weekend, Bellenoit said.

A woman at the St. Francis Xavier parish office directed all questions to Kearns.

There have been no accusations against Lima on the Cape, where he worked for the past 10 years, Kearns said.

Lima, who has U.S. citizenship, reportedly left for Brazil after being notified by the Connecticut Department of Children and Families that the allegation against him was substantiated, Kearns said.

Lima was part of a Missio or mission — priests organized and sponsored by Brazilian bishops to pastor Brazilian Catholics who now live in the United States. The leader of his mission has been in touch with him to persuade him to return, according to Kearns.

When it was discovered that Lima may have left the country, diocese officials contacted police in Bridgeport, Conn., where his mission was based, Kearns said.

A spokesman with the Bridgeport Police Department did not return a telephone message left today. Connecticut authorities had not contacted Lima before or since to speak to him about the accusation, Kearns said.

Connecticut Department of Children and Families officials could neither confirm nor deny an ongoing investigation into Lima, agency spokesman Josh Howroyd said.

Generally, when an investigation involves a person from out of state, child protective services officials in that state are contacted, Howroyd said.

When the case involves child sexual abuse or exploitation, law enforcement is also contacted, he said.

In the past five years, the Fall River diocese has restricted four priests from ministering because of allegations of sexual abuse, Kearns said. The diocese policy is to place accused priests on leave during the investigation, he said.

In a Cape Cod Times story eight years ago about Pope John Paul II asking forgiveness for the church's transgressions, Lima said the message marked an important change by the church in its attitude toward people who have offended in the past.

"It is good to see a good vision for the future where all social segments are together," Lima said.