

Priest accused of attempted murder is captured

LAS VEGAS, Nev. – A Las Vegas priest accused of attempted murder and sexual assault on a parish employee was captured near Phoenix Feb. 1 after a six-day manhunt across several states.

Father George Chaanine, 52, has been charged with attempted murder with a deadly weapon, sexual assault, kidnapping and other charges in connection with an alleged attack Jan. 26 on Michaelina Bellamy, an employee at Our Lady of Las Vegas Parish where Father Chaanine was administrator. He also faces federal charges of fleeing to avoid prosecution.

Las Vegas Bishop Joseph A. Pepe, who immediately suspended Father Chaanine when the attack was reported, congratulated law enforcement authorities on finding the priest.

Just two days before the alleged attack, Father Chaanine had formalized his departure from the Maronite Catholic Diocese of Our Lady of Lebanon of Los Angeles and been incardinated in (legally attached to) the Latin-rite Diocese of Las Vegas.

“We are relieved that Father Chaanine has been found and now justice can be served through the legal process,” Bishop Pepe said in a Feb. 1 statement.

“We have worked closely with the authorities and are hopeful that the information we provided proved helpful,” he added.

Bellamy, 54, said Father Chaanine had made several odd overtures toward her in the days before the alleged attack.

According to the police report, she said that on the afternoon of Jan. 26 he approached her at her desk in a parish office and hit her on the head with a wine bottle until it shattered. The report says he then dragged her by the hair to his office. As she drifted between consciousness and unconsciousness he allegedly

reached under her clothes and fondled her breasts and genitals.

Bellamy told police that when she tried fighting back, he stomped on her hand, then straddled her and began to choke her. She said she thought she was going to die and started praying, when suddenly he stopped, stood up and said, "I am over the edge. I am going to kill myself. Wait for 15 minutes. I will get you an ambulance."

After someone who heard her cries for help made an emergency call, police cordoned off the area and searched for Father Chaanine for several hours, but he apparently had fled in his car immediately after the attack.

According to the police report, police found broken glass, blood, broken fingernails and other evidence in the church offices.

Bellamy - who has a long professional resume as a principal singer and dancer in the Las Vegas Folies Bergere in the 1980s and a singer at many local lounges - also served as a soloist at Our Lady of Las Vegas liturgies. After the attack she was taken to University Medical Center, where she was treated for a gash on the head, a broken hand and bruises.

Father Chaanine is a native of Lebanon who came to the United States and was ordained a priest of the Maronite Diocese of Our Lady of Lebanon of Los Angeles in 1996. He worked at Maronite Catholic parishes in Wheeling, W.Va., and El Paso, Texas, before his transfer to Las Vegas about three years ago to serve the Maronite Catholic community of St. Sharbel Mission.

In Maronite records his first name is given in the French version, Georges. Members of the mission, which is just now in the process of building its own church, have been worshipping at Our Lady of Las Vegas Church.

Last July Father Chaanine was named administrator of Our Lady of Las Vegas Parish after the pastor, Father Robert Petekiewicz, left amid allegations by several church employees that he was misusing church funds.

In October a new Maronite priest from Lebanon, Father Youssef Mouannes, was brought in to lead St. Sharbel Mission.

On Jan. 24 Father Chaanine was formally incardinated in the Las Vegas Diocese, diocesan spokeswoman Rachel Wilkinson told Catholic News Service.

She said that after the alleged attack two days later Father Chaanine was suspended and Father Anthony Vercellone, diocesan vocations director, was named temporary administrator of the parish.