

STATUE VANDAL AVOIDS JAIL CATHOLICS OUTRAGED, THOUGH RASTAFARIAN FACES DEPORT

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Body

A Rastafarian who admitted vandalizing religious statues in several Brooklyn neighborhoods escaped a prison sentence yesterday, but remains behind bars, facing deportation.

Primus St. Croix, 33, was accused of desecrating statues of revered figures such as the Virgin Mary, St. Pius X and children praying at the feet of Jesus, at various Catholic churches and institutions.

The acts outraged Catholics, particularly because they were committed early Sunday mornings, so parishioners would see the wreckage on their way to church.

District Attorney Charles Hynes wanted St. Croix to serve a maximum of seven years in jail for second-degree criminal mischief, first-degree aggravated assault, tampering with physical evidence, trespass and other charges.

But Supreme Court Justice Anne Feldman said she believed St. Croix's promise he would not commit such acts again.

She accepted St. Croix's guilty plea and sentenced him to five years of probation.

St. Croix, an undocumented immigrant from St. Lucia, West Indies, was returned to Rikers Island, where he will be held until Immigration and Naturalization Service authorities pick him up, said Executive Assistant District Attorney Lance Ogiste.

"He is not going anywhere," Ogiste said.

"Technically, there is nothing to keep him in jail in New York state. It is our information that immigration is going to deport him."

INS spokesman Mark Thorn refused to confirm whether the agency was taking action against St. Croix.

Despite the continued detention, Hynes was deeply disappointed by the judge's leniency.

"We were not happy," said Ogiste. "His actions had a dramatic effect on not only the Catholic community here in Brooklyn, but all over the city."

In an Oct. 3 letter, Hynes asked Feldman to "vacate" St. Croix's Sept. 29 guilty plea and let his office prosecute.

St. Croix had said he was acting on orders from God to fight against the worship of idols. But the Bible-quoting Rastafarian told the judge he would not do it again, said his attorney, Marty Gorfinkel.

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St. Croix admitted desecrating statues at five churches in Flatbush and Canarsie: St. Jerome's Church, Our Lady of Refuge Church, Convent of the Apostles of Infinite Love, St. Francis of Assisi Church, and Knights of Columbus St. Pius X Council. The attacks stretched from September 1999 to January 2000.

Mike Traverso, deputy grand knight of the Knights of Columbus Pius X Council, told Feldman that St. Croix had traumatized the community when he smashed a 1,000-pound statue of St. Pius X, chopped off its hands and face and dragged it into the street before Sunday Masses on Jan. 9.

"He told the judge how the neighborhood formed a 24-hour watch group [to protect the statues]," said Tom Traverso, another member of the council.

"There was all kinds of anguish of leaving their families to watch the statues for 12-hour shifts."

The council has since replaced the statue with a marble replica, Tom Traverso said, but it will stay indoors.

"The statue stood outside for 37 years until he came along," he said.

"If somebody went out and stole a car, do you smack him on the wrist and send him back on the street?"

"You can't put a monetary value on the damage he did."

Graphic

Primus St. Croix

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