

NATION

Rev. Dantica, Haitian who died in fed custody

BY JEROME BURDI

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The Rev. Joseph Dantica was remembered at his funeral service in Flatbush yesterday as a man who loved tending to his parishioners in his native Haiti but died alone in federal custody at a Miami hospital.

Dantica, 81, died on Nov. 3 five days after seeking political asylum.

More than 100 people gathered at the Evangelical Crusade of Fishers of Men to hear the service, many losing their composure to tears.

A growing group of celebrities and politicians are calling for a federal investigation into Dantica's death and for an overhaul of U.S. policy toward Haitian refugees and immigrants.

Among those asking for an investigation are director Jonathan Demme, author Edwidge Danticat, Dantica's niece, and U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek (D-Miami).

"The U.S. government should want to investigate it," author Walter Mosley said before the funeral. "What happened and why did it happen and how did it happen?"

Dantica and his son, Maxo, were taken into U.S. custody on Oct. 29 in Miami after asking for temporary asylum. The father and son fled their Bel-Air neighborhood after it plummeted into war and Dantica's church and school were burned last month following a battle between U.N. peacekeeping forces and gang members.

With all that he worked for gone, Dantica fled to the United States. Family members said immigration officials took away his medication for high blood pressure while he was in custody. Department of Homeland Security spokesman Russ Knocke told The Associated Press that he was unaware of any such confiscation.

Dantica died of pancreatitis, Knocke said. After Dantica died, his son was released.

"It's a big, big loss," said Dantica's brother, the Rev. Luis Dantica. "I lost him, my family lost him. I need justice."

Edwidge Danticat, who spells her name differently because of a clerical error on her father's birth certificate, said after the service that her uncle had been visiting the United States since the 1970s but "he always wanted to go back to his work" in Haiti.

Joseph Dantica died without his family beside him.

"For someone to make it that far, no one wants their relative to die alone," Mosley said.

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