

An 'innocent' whose death touched us all

By DEAN C. BALSAMINI
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

She was an innocent victim whose death has "touched hearts all over the world" and "is even now in the arms of almighty God," Cardinal John O'Connor told mourners yesterday during the funeral mass for Jennifer Schweiger.

An overflow crowd of more than 500 people, many of them volunteers who searched for the girl during the 34 days she was missing, gathered in Holy Family R.C. Church, Westerleigh, for the 70-minute service.

Cardinal O'Connor called the 12-year-old "truly sinless," and "an immense gift, an indescribable gift that God gave to this world."

The child's parents, Karen and Kenneth, and brother, Ken Jr., followed the tiny, ivory colored and gilt casket into the church.

The Schweigers were flanked by Detectives Ralph Aquino and Robert Jensen, who have handled the case.

Charles Cutugno, the husband of volunteer coordinator Donna Cutugno, read a passage from the Book of Lamentations, which describes how the faithfulness of God brings hope in times of grief. Sgt. Ronald Jacobs, who was among the searchers who uncov-

ered Jennifer's shallow grave, read from the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians.

The cardinal said that on his way to the church he received a call from Mayor Edward I. Koch, who said his doctors advised him not to attend the funeral. "Would you tell the family how grateful we are to them for their example?" the cardinal quoted the mayor as saying.

Koch also told O'Connor he was sending a \$500 contribution to the foundation for Down's syndrome children.

In addition, Mother Teresa called the cardinal and said: "Would you please tell everybody there that I'm having all of my sisters, including myself" pray throughout the entire time of the funeral.

"Not for the soul of Jennifer — everyone knows where that is — but for the family, and all who have been involved. So people's hearts are being touched all over the world," Cardinal O'Connor said.

Bishop Patrick V. Ahern, the episcopal vicar of Staten Island, said in the homily that the white dress Jennifer was being buried in "speaks of the lovely innocence of a simple child.

"Few go through life without staining their baptismal robe and staining it many a time. ... But

not Jennifer Schweiger ... that dear, loveable child. (She) never even knew what sin is," Ahern said. "God did withhold from her some of the gifts he gives to others, but to her He gave the most wonderful gift of all. The gift of perfect innocence."

"No wonder everybody loved