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Fall of a Beloved Priest; Linden Pastor Arrested on Drug Charge

By Charles Strum

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When a virtuous man stumbles, others feel the pain. And in this small city bound up with church, family and friendship, the pain is palpable these days because the man was special, one who gave comfort and offered certainty in uncertain times.

He was a 51-year-old parish priest, the Rev. Patrick M. Hurley, an associate pastor at St. Elizabeth's Roman Catholic Church and the chaplain for the police and fire departments.

Two days before Thanksgiving, the Morris County prosecutor's office charged him with buying cocaine from a drug ring that operated out of a transmission shop in the Denville area. Although the authorities declined to give details of their investigation, it appears that Father Hurley's arrest was an unintended byproduct of the surveillance being used to trap the suspected dealers.

It also appears, the authorities said, that Father Hurley was an occasional purchaser who bought the drug only for himself. In Drug-Treatment Program

He was released on \$5,000 bond and has entered no plea, but he left almost immediately for a drug-treatment program in the Midwest, said his lawyer, John J. Montefusco, of Mountain Lakes. He will probably be placed in a court-monitored program for first offenders that could eventually lead to the dismissal of the charges against him, his lawyer said.

In the days since his arrest became public, the word "shock" has been used so much here that it has almost ceased to have meaning, though it is the only word that most people can summon to describe their immediate reaction. They struggle to avoid the past tense when describing someone they still revere and pray to see back home again.

"He was my priest. He is my priest," said Ann Ferguson, personnel director of the Elizabeth Housing Authority and a member of St. Elizabeth's for six years. "He's loved so much, it's unbelievable."

Capt. Robert Roscinski of the Linden Fire Department said Father Hurley "was always there" for those traumatized by the tragedy of a fire.

"He had a sixth sense to be there," said Captain Roscinski, a parishioner whose son was an altar boy supervised by Father Hurley. "We're all heartbroken. It was a total surprise."

Comforting the Sick

The 45-year-old red-brick church on Hussa Street bears the name of Elizabeth of Hungary, who was canonized for her work among the sick. After her husband, Ludwig of Bavaria, died on his way to the Crusades, she persevered in her good works, setting up what amounted to an early form of hospital. During the six years of his service at St. Elizabeth's, this was Father Hurley's calling as well. He spent most of each day shuttling to hospitals and homes, visiting with the sick and dying, helping to comfort or heal.

Now, without him, healing of a different sort has begun in the parish.

Don Niles, a retired A.T.&T. employee and a parishioner for 10 years, was a close friend of Father Pat, as the priest is known. Mr. Niles described him as a blur of activity in the 100-year-old parish of 2,700 families and three priests.

"On a typical day he'd visit four hospitals, see 32 patients, then rush back to the rectory to work on the bulletin," Mr. Niles said. "After that there was altar boy practice and more house calls."

Mr. Niles continued: "He came to the house a half-dozen times a week. It was a place to visit. Sometimes he'd come over looking like a deflated balloon. Too much pressure.

"I looked up to him like a brother who just happened to be my priest. I said, 'Pat, you have to rest. You have to rest.' He would be talking and not listening, so relieved to let it all out, you know. I never suspected anything like this."

Ms. Ferguson called Father Hurley a "workaholic," adding, "He just worked himself crazy."
Prayer Service Called

A few days after the arrest, Mr. Niles and others called 30 or 40 people to a prayer service for Father Hurley at the parish school. More than 100 people came, Mr. Niles said. "We prayed for Father Pat, and then I said, 'Let's pray for Father Karl. He's lost his right arm and his left.' "

Father Karl is the Rev. Karl Roesch (pronounced Resh), who became pastor almost five years ago. He said he was as surprised as anyone by Father Hurley's arrest. Father Hurley came to him as soon as the authorities took action, then left to seek treatment, Father Roesch said. There was no time to prepare the parish because the news became public immediately.

For Father Roesch, the last few weeks have been filled with unscheduled extra duties: a special sermon, phone calls, visits to the parish school.

"I spoke to the children, and answered any questions," Father Roesch said. "He made a mistake, and the children had to be aware of that. I told them he's being cared for. Some were upset. They all know us. We're here day in and day out."

Linden is a city of 37,000, its business district dotted with shops and offices that signify its Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, Hungarian and Ukrainian heritage. A onetime farming community that became rapidly industrialized in this century, the city is a home for General Motors, Exxon and a number of chemical and petroleum manufacturers that provide jobs locally and whose chimneys and rigging are the distinctive sights along the northern stretch of the New Jersey Turnpike.

Most of its citizens live in modest and scrupulously tended one- and two-family homes -- many of them all paid for, Father Roesch says -- and they wear smalltown pride easily. Wood Avenue, the main shopping street, seems insulated from recessionary gloom, with Christmas carols blaring from speakers on the steps of City Hall.

In such a place, Father Hurley's arrest was unexpected, to say the least, but in its aftermath the parishioners of St. Elizabeth's have come together to support their priest and gather strength from each other.

"At the prayer service, there were grown men crying," Mr. Niles said. "But not one came to damn him. They said, 'How can we help him?' Most of us wanted to do something immediately, but we realized that might not be the best thing, even if we could. We prayed for patience.

"Aside from everything else," Mr. Niles concluded, "the priestly life is a lonely life, and he had no family. We were his family."

Father Hurley's future at St. Elizabeth's is uncertain, Father Roesch said. Whether he returns or is assigned other duties will depend on assessments by doctors as well as discussions between the Archdiocese of Newark, which owns the church, and the abbey of the Benedictine Order in Morristown, which staffs it.

"We're storming heaven with prayers to get him back," Ms. Ferguson said. "No matter where he goes, we'll all reach out to him."

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