

Jackson priest cited for public lewdness

■ Parishioners say troubles will test, strengthen Catholics.

By Mark Huffman

Members of the Catholic parish in Jackson say they'll emerge stronger from the incident that may have ended the tenure of their priest.

The Rev. Gerald F. Chleborad was arrested last Thursday by police in a Salt Lake City suburb after he's said to have exposed himself.

The priest who took Chleborad's place before the congregation at Our Lady of the Mountains Catholic Church last Sunday said his brief acquaintance with the Jackson parish has convinced him they will survive the shock of Chleborad's trouble.

Father Rory Schiffbauer, sent this week to fill in for a few days, said he urged the congregation last Sunday to give themselves to "a lot of prayer and support, patience."

"Most of the people are hurt, but supportive" after the news, Schiffbauer said.

Some Jackson Catholics declined to talk about the incident or its effect on the church. Others said they think any harm to the congregation will heal, and even thought the problem might have some benefit.

Connie Bartek, a lifelong member of Our Lady of the Mountains, said of Chleborad that parishioners "are very supportive of him — he's been an excellent pastor, our church has just grown over the past few years."

Of Chleborad's trouble, Bartek said, "It's heartbreaking."

She thought the incident would "make us a little stronger."

Another member of the parish, Francis Warziniack, also believes the immediate problem will not last, and that parishioners will be strengthened.

"It will bring the congregation

closer together," Warziniack said. "That's what always happens with things like this."

"Everybody is feeling a variety of emotions — sadness, shock, outrage," said Susie Palmer. "But the healing has begun, people are pulling together."

Palmer said that feeling of coming together is vital because "the church is people as well as the clergy."

Father Schiffbauer was "amazed by the congregation — they are very faith-filled, they're hopeful."

But he said the first shock was hard for many.

"It takes a lot of time to heal and be compassionate," he said.

Police in Sandy said a security videotape in the ZCMI store in the South Towne Center recorded Chleborad touching a coat sleeve on a rack with his penis. He was cited for lewdness, a misdemeanor, and released.

Chleborad, 60, is now on "temporary leave," said Scott Farris, a spokesman for the Catholic Diocese in Cheyenne. Farris said Chleborad has met with Bishop Joseph Hart and that Chleborad "will be receiving counseling."

"After that, they'll talk about what he did, what he apparently did, and the bishop will decide what happens."

Among options are returning Chleborad to Jackson, a transfer to lead another parish, or assignment to other new duties, Farris said.

Father Chleborad, a Cheyenne native, has been a priest for 35 years, all of that time in Wyoming. Before coming to Jackson in July 1990, he worked in Rock Springs. In addition to his duties in leading the Jackson congregation, which has about 400 families, he also led the 40-family parish in Star Valley.

Father Schiffbauer said Our Lady of the Mountains will have temporary priests for at least a few weeks, and perhaps through the summer.