

Priest's disappearance a shock to his friends

RONAN (AP) — Authorities said Friday that blood on clothing found near Polson earlier this week matches that of the Rev. John Patrick Kerrigan, a Catholic priest missing since last Friday.

Lake County Undersheriff Joe Geldrich said the state crime laboratory reported that the blood on the clothing is type A, the same as Kerrigan's. But type-A blood is common to nearly half the population.

Kerrigan has been the subject of a wide-scale search since he and his car were reported missing Monday.

Kerrigan, 58, was last seen at a Ronan Bakery the night of July 21.

Friends of Kerrigan and Sacred Heart Church parishioners gathered here Thursday night for a special Mass for his welfare, recalling him as the priest with the "broad smile."

The small brick church was overflowing with people Thursday, most of whom never had a chance to meet their new pastor.

Kerrigan had been scheduled to take over the parish last Saturday, the day he disappeared.

Nine area priests celebrated the special evening Mass, and the Rev. Bernard Sullivan of Columbia Falls delivered a brief sermon in which he asked parishioners to be hopeful.

"We pray that Father Kerrigan is safely in the hands of God," Sullivan said. "There's just a lot of speculation about what happened to him, but we have confidence in our local authorities and faith and confidence in God himself."

Law enforcement officials are calling the situation bleak after having found Kerrigan's blood-soaked clothing, including a shirt, shoes and a windbreaker, alongside Montana 35 near Polson earlier.

Kerrigan had moved into the Ronan rectory to assume his new post after serving in the Plains parish for the past two years.

The Butte native attended schools there before going to Seattle, where he attended St. Edward's Seminary. He was ordained in Butte and began work at St. Patrick's Church there in 1954. Since then, he had served 11 parishes throughout the state, including Butte and Dillon.

"He loved rural parishes," said the Rev. James Gannon of Stevensville, who had been assisted by Kerrigan for two years in Dillon in the early 1960s.

"Father Kerrigan loved to cowboy — he'd get all dressed up and help brand and work cattle," Gannon said.

Bob Deneault, owner of Deneault's Bakery, who was the last person to talk to Kerrigan before he disappeared, said, "It seemed like he was going to be a real asset to the church and a super person for the whole community. This is a heck of a shock."

Kerrigan, who strode into the bakery in red shorts, a white T-shirt and tennis shoes, told Deneault and others there that he was getting acquainted with Ronan in his evening walks.

He also told them he planned to attend a funeral and a wedding in Plains the following day. "What I gather, he never got there either," Deneault said.



REV. JOHN KERRIGAN