

Father Ritter's accuser called 'chronic liar'

By Tracy Early

Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Franciscan Father Bruce Ritter said Dec. 21 that he felt "a lot better" after the young man who had accused him of financial and sexual improprieties was described as a chronic liar by his father.

In a telephone interview, the priest said he hoped his personal ordeal had ended, but that he was afraid "sleazy" media coverage of the allegations would seriously hurt Covenant House, the nation's largest private organization aiding runaway youths.

"Income from donors is going to take a savage chop," he said.

Father Ritter founded the Covenant House ministry in 1969 to help homeless youngsters in New York City. The ministry now operates in a number of U.S. cities and abroad, and has an annual budget of \$85 million, 95 percent of which comes from private donations.

The allegations of improprieties became public Dec. 12 when the *New York Post* ran a story reporting the claims made by the young man. Other publications subsequently picked up the story, identifying the man as Timothy Warner, the name he used when he entered Covenant House.

Manhattan District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau confirmed Dec. 13 that he was investigating Warner's allegations of financial improprieties, but he said media reports contained "numerous inaccuracies."

Warner claimed that he and Father Ritter had had sexual relations and that the priest had given him cash and other benefits worth \$25,000 from Covenant House funds.

At a Dec. 14 press conference Father Ritter denied all charges of impropriety, and Covenant House released a detailed statement showing expenditures of \$9,793.33 on the young man. The agency

said this sum is less than the annual \$15,000-\$18,000 spent on others in the Rights of Passage program, in which the young man was enrolled.

The Rights of Passage program includes matching each young person with an older "mentor." Father Ritter, assigning himself to mentor this young man, acknowledged taking him on trips during which the two slept in the same room. But the priest denied that any sexual relationship had developed.

Using clues contained in various stories told by Warner, Covenant House spokesman John Kells said, the agency was able to uncover his real identity, locate his father and bring the father to New York Dec. 20.

Kells said the father, identified as Alton H. Kite, a professor of accounting from Gainesville, Texas, had agreed to talk with a small number of journalists in New York.

According to the transcript of an interview with New York TV station WNYW, Kite said the man previously identified as John Warner was actually his son, Kevin Lee Kite. Parts of the interview were aired by WNYW Dec. 20.

Kite produced a photo of himself with his son, who he said would be 26 years old in January. Warner had variously described himself in news interviews as 19 or 20 years old. Those over 21 are not eligible for Covenant House programs.

Alton Kite said he had no direct knowledge of his son's activities since the young man moved to New York, but said his son had a long history of hurting people who tried to help him.

"I know that my son has a history of lying about various things, sometimes for no reason at all," he said. A series of counselors over the years were unsuccessful in helping him overcome his "persona-

lity disorder," the father added.

"My son," Kite said, "is the type person who could give you a bad check last week, and come in and convince you to take another one this week."

He reported that his son had dropped out of North Texas State University, drifted into prostitution and run up large debts on credit cards taken from family and friends. "His mother and I have exhausted our financial and emotional resources in helping him," the father said, adding that his son had not communicated with family members since leaving last Jan. 14.

A spokeswoman for Morgenthau said Dec. 21 that the district attorney's investigation was continuing. Father Ritter said he considered the investigation obligatory for Morgenthau and advantageous for Covenant House, so that critics could not charge a coverup.

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