

Priest takes leave as new accusers surface

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — At the direction of his Franciscan superiors, Father Bruce Ritter Feb. 6 took temporary leave from Covenant House, the nationally famous New York shelter for runaway teenagers, until the order investigates allegations of sexual misconduct.

The decision followed close on the heels of a front-page story in *The New York Times* revealing that a third former Covenant House resident in less than two months has accused Father Ritter of initiating sexual relations with him.

The 62-year-old Conventual Franciscan emphatically denied all the allegations against him. In a statement announcing his temporary leave, Father Ritter said he needed "several weeks off to rest and recuperate and deal with the personal stress caused by this controversy."

Father Ritter said the allegations "and the need to deny them constantly" made it impossible for him to give the "full attention" needed to the "24-hour-a-day job" of running Covenant House.

"I have no way of proving my innocence. My accusers cannot establish my guilt," he said.

Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York said he agreed with Father Ritter's decision to step down temporarily, but said he did not view that decision in any way as evidence of guilt.

Father Conall McHugh, minister provincial of the Conventual Franciscans of Union City, N.J., to which Father Ritter belongs, issued a statement late Feb. 6, saying that he and the council had directed Father Ritter to remove himself from Covenant House responsibilities and take a rest.

He said Father Ritter will be on leave from Covenant House until the order completes its inquiry into allegations by Darryl J. Bassile of Ithaca, who said he had sexual relations with Father Ritter several times between 1973 and 1975, while he was a Covenant House resident.

In an emergency meeting late Feb. 6, the Covenant House board of directors appointed board member Frank Macchiarola, former chancellor of the New York City Schools System, as interim replacement for Father Ritter.

The *Times* said Bassile, now 31, was 14



Frank Macchiarola was named interim head of Covenant House Feb. 6. Catholic News Service

when he entered Covenant House and 16 when he left. It reported that Bassile originally telephoned his complaints to Father McHugh and subsequently called the *Times* when he received no follow-up response from the provincial's office.

Bassile's complaints to the Franciscan order followed publication by *The New York Post* last Dec. 12 of allegations by Kevin Lee Kite that he had received up to \$25,000 in cash and gifts from Father Ritter and had given the priest sexual favors in return. But the *Times* said it had confirmed that Bassile originally reported his complaints about Father Ritter to an Ithaca psychotherapist last April, more than six months before Kite's allegations.

The initial uproar over Kite's claims died down rather quickly after Kite's father, Alton Kite, said his son was a chronic liar with a history of turning against people who had helped him.

Also involved in the new round of allegations were claims by former Covenant

House resident John Melican that he and Father Ritter had an intermittent sexual relationship for more than a decade, from the early 1970s to 1986.

Melican's accusations were first published Jan. 24 by another New York newspaper, *The Village Voice*. The *Voice's* story included excerpts from an interview with Melican in 1986, when he was 30 years old. The *Times* said it located Melican in Seattle, and in telephone interviews Feb. 2 and 5, he said that he began a sexual relationship with Father Ritter when he was 13 years old.

Father Ritter told the *Times* he had met Bassile only once and had seen Melican on and off over a number of years, but he denied any sexual relationship with either youth.

In his Feb. 6 statement, Father McHugh said that after Bassile's original complaint on Jan. 2, his office made several "unsuccessful attempts to reinstate con-

tact" before it reached him by phone Jan. 24.

"Immediately thereafter, the Franciscan order began its own inquiry into the allegations," he said.

He said that Father Canice Connors of Winston-Salem, N.C., a member of the order and former director of a treatment center for priests with chemical dependencies or sexual or emotional problems, interviewed Bassile Jan. 29.

"As of this date, the inquiry into this allegation is being continued by the Franciscan order," Father McHugh said.

He expressed continuing support by the order for Covenant House and its work with needy children.

In his new statement he took no position on Father Ritter's guilt or innocence. He said that when he had expressed "unequivocal support" for Father Ritter in December, his statement at that time "was based on Father Ritter's assurance to his religious superior that he had not been involved in the fraudulent use of Covenant House funds nor in any other alleged misconduct."

The new controversy surrounding Father Ritter, whose name has become practically synonymous with Covenant House, could further damage the organization's fundraising efforts.

In recent years, Covenant House, which Father Ritter has directed since he founded it in 1968, has also become headquarters for an international network of Covenant House shelters and rehabilitation services for homeless and runaway youths.

Covenant House suffered a significant drop in donations following Kite's allegations against Father Ritter in December. In December and January it suspended plans to open new programs in five U.S. cities and expand existing programs in three cities.

The Manhattan district attorney's office has been investigating allegations of financial improprieties by Covenant House in connection with Kite's accusations.

Covenant House records show expenditures of \$9,793.33 on Kite, a figure in line with expenses for other youths in the education and rehabilitation program in which Kite was enrolled, but Kite claims he received cash and other aid amounting to \$25,000.

Fr. Stallings dismisses excommunication as useless

By Mark Pattison
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Father George A. Stallings Jr.'s excommunication Feb. 5 from the Roman Catholic Church has provoked widespread dismay from black Catholic leaders.

The break prompted the dissident priest to declare Feb. 6 that excommunication was useless since "I no longer have any desire to be part of the Roman Catholic Church."

It also provoked one of the priests in Father Stallings' African-American Catholic congregation to split with him. The priest, Salvatorian Father Bruce E. Greening, sought reconciliation with the Catholic Church.

Washington Archdiocese vicar general Father William Kane, in a Feb. 5 statement, said Father Stallings had "excommunicated himself" when he "announced publicly his formal and com-

plete break with the Roman Catholic Church."

Father Stallings "rejected a number of church teachings," Father Kane said in the statement.

On an episode of the "Donahue" television talk show taped Jan. 30 and aired in nationwide syndication Feb. 5, Father Stallings said that "as of today, the African-American Catholic congregation is going independent" and would be "no

longer under the pope or under the aegis of the Roman Catholic Church."

On "Donahue" and a Feb. 6 Washington television interview show, "Evening Exchange," Father Stallings has said his new church would allow optional celibacy, women's ordination, birth control, abortion, no individual confessions, and would permit divorced and remarried people to receive Communion.

Suspension and excommunication were "political tactics used by the powerful, the oppressors, to further enslave and oppress the oppressed," Father Stallings said on "Donahue."

Father Kane's statement on the priest also said, "Any Catholic who would knowingly and willingly renounce his or her Catholic faith to become a full and active member of Father Stallings' congregation would also incur automatic excommunication."

Father Greening, the first priest to join Father Stallings, wrote Cardinal James A. Hickey of Washington to seek reconciliation.

The letter was being "carefully studied," according to a Feb. 8 statement from Eileen Marx, Washington archdiocesan spokeswoman. "Every avenue of reconciliation consistent with the faith and practice of the Catholic Church will be pursued," Marx statement said.

Catholic press must make room for critical views

ROCKVILLE CENTRE, N.Y. (CNS) — "Freedom of the press is necessary in every society, including the church," said the president of the Catholic Press Association through a statement issued for Catholic Press Month, observed in February.

"Speaking the truth with love is not always good politics," Father John T. Catoir said, "but if the Catholic press is to be an authentic press there must be room even for the unpopular views of critics."

The press association's headquarters in Rockville Centre released Father Catoir's statement along with those of Archbishop John P. Foley, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, and St. Louis Auxiliary Bishop Edward J.

O'Donnell, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Communications and honorary president of the Catholic Press Association.

In his remarks, Father Catoir, who also heads The Christophers, said, "Respectful criticism often contains the seed of purification and reform. No human organization is above criticism."

He added that "the Catholic journalist is always respectful of orthodoxy. Reporting on the news and giving it careful analysis, however, is a job that can bring us into areas of tension. This is a healthy tension for all concerned."

Father Catoir quoted a recent writing from Bishop Karl Lehmann of Mainz, West Germany, who "insisted that the

Catholic press cannot be made into 'an extension of the long arm of the church.'"

In his statement Bishop O'Donnell said, "The signs of messiahship to which Jesus appealed were signs of service to others: 'The blind see, the deaf hear, lepers are cleansed.'"

"The Catholic press best expresses the word when, like Him, it speaks for the weak and powerless in society."

The task of the Catholic press, Bishop O'Donnell said, is "to take the age-old revelation that God makes of his will for us and to apply it to the needs of today."

Archbishop Foley's statement said, "Now, more than ever, without the Catholic press, you can't understand the world."