

Kidnappers indoctrinated Rochester priest

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Despite his recent abduction by kidnapers, Father Francis A. Amico, CSB, doesn't plan to take any precautions to avoid another involuntary vacation from his parish in Colombia.

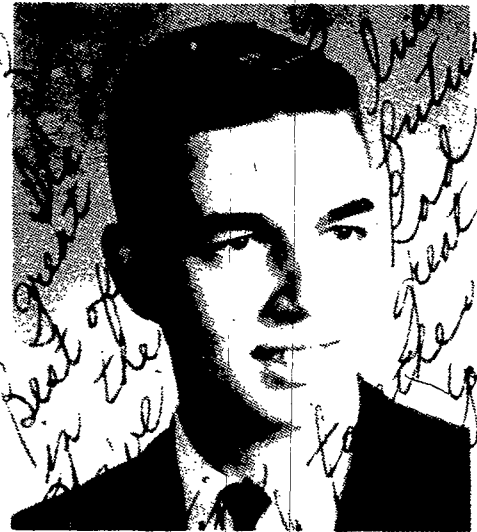
"Here in Colombia, many kidnappings ... occur every day," the pastor said in a Feb. 22 telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "When you live in Colombia, violence is a part of everyday life."

Father Amico's everyday life changed drastically on Thursday morning, Feb. 15, when he was abducted at gunpoint by members of the leftist *Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional* — the National Liberation Army — near Our Lady of the Assumption Parish in Cali. The ELN is the most active of four leftist groups currently operating in Colombia.

The Basilian priest — a native of Rochester and a former teacher at Aquinas Institute — was accosted as he walked from his residence to celebrate Mass at a convent housing sisters from Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity.

"As I was walking down a very short street, a man came up behind me (and put) a gun to my back," Father Amico recalled, noting that the assailant addressed him by name. The gunman took the priest to a nearby Jeep, where two other guerrillas were waiting.

The trio of kidnapers then drove Father



Father Robert Werth's 1963 Aquinas yearbook carries an inscription from Father Francis Amico.

Amico through Cali, ordering him to keep his head down during the entire journey. Father Amico said the kidnapers had put an identification card in his pocket, and instructed him that if the vehicle were to be stopped by Colombian police, he was to say the guerrillas were his friends and that they were on their way to visit a mutual acquaintance.

Father Amico said the ID card proved that the ELN guerrillas knew who he was and that the kidnapping was well-planned, since it would have taken a few months to prepare the card. The priest had left his own identification behind at the parish rec-

tory that day.

An hour and a half later, the Jeep came to a stop. The kidnapers blindfolded Father Amico and took him inside a house "somewhere in the countryside," he said.

For his first two days in captivity, the priest was held in a one-window room that overlooked a patio behind the house. In that room, the priest recalled, he was indoctrinated with the Marxist-Leninist viewpoint of his militant hosts.

"We are dealing with intelligent, well-educated people," Father Amico said. "These people had a real grasp of the situation in Colombia."

For five to six hours daily, his ELN captors expounded on their views of U.S. intervention in Colombia, the role of oil companies in their country's impoverishment, the guerrilla movement's activities and the church's place in Colombian society.

Following the lectures, his captors would show Father Amico videotaped films documenting their assertions, and would then ask him for his opinions.

"I spoke to them freely about what I believed about non-violence, Jesus," the priest said. Asked to justify abducting him against his will, Father Amico's captors said that "during a state of war, things are permitted that (the ELN) otherwise would not do. They (could) justify this in terms of the state of war going on in the country," the priest reported.

Father Amico also said his kidnapers told him they do not torture prisoners, although they occasionally execute some after "trials."

The ELN then informed Father Amico that he was one of three Americans they had abducted to protest President George Bush's visit to Colombia that week for an anti-drug summit with the three Andean na-

tions of Peru, Bolivia and Colombia. The other two hostages, both released last weekend, were James Arthur and teacher David Leslie Kent.

Actually, despite its initial success in capturing the three Americans, the ELN had called off several other planned kidnappings of Americans because the Colombian government had captured and killed an ELN operative who had participated in one of the other kidnappings, the guerrillas told Father Amico.

After two days of confinement in one room, Father Amico told the guerrillas he was "going crazy." "Then they let me walk around the house," the priest said, noting that he was blindfolded and taken to the back room whenever meetings took place.

The priest said his ELN captors fed him well and treated him decently. "I had the feeling they weren't too threatened by me ... since I was a priest," he said, commenting that the ELN "indicated that the Basilian fathers were doing good work in the barrios ... because we were helping people to become united in spiritual and material ways."

The guerrillas captors didn't have kind words for other priests and missionaries, he remarked. For example, he said, the ELN condemned priests who charge poor people for performing such sacraments as baptism. The guerrillas also expressed contempt for evangelical Protestant missionaries from the United States who, they claimed, promote "a gringo Jesus" — a blond, blue-eyed, mouthpiece for U.S. intervention in Colombia, he said.

Father Amico recalled that of all his leftist captors, only one guard called him "Father." The guard also paid the priest a small kindness by giving up his bed so that

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State office rejects parish's bid for funding to renovate convent

CANANDAIGUA — The New York state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has rejected an application submitted by St. Mary's Parish for funds to renovate buildings on its complex, especially the 166-year-old convent.

However, the parish was encouraged by state officials to resubmit the \$260,000 grant application by March 15, according to James Rulison, co-chairman of the committee looking into the future of the convent.

"They said that we were close to getting an award," Rulison said. "We feel very optimistic about it from the encouragement we received."

The grant was one of approximately 100 submitted to the state for funds from a pool of up to \$5 million the state had available for such projects, Rulison said. Only 16 grants have been approved, he noted.

But the state now has a pool of approximately \$35 million available from previous grant awards that were not used, and St. Mary's funding could come from this pool, Rulison explained.

Officials from the state were scheduled


to meet with Rulison and other committee members this week to revise the application in time for the March deadline for resubmission. A decision is expected within the next four to five months, Rulison said.

The original decision to apply for the grant grew out of efforts last summer to save the historic convent building. Initially, the parish had planned to sell the convent to a developer, but objections from neighbors and parishioners led the developer to release the parish from the sales agreement in August.

An ad hoc committee has been meeting since last summer to explore options for the parish.

If the state approves the revised grant, the parish will still have to find matching funds to pay for work needed in the convent, rectory, and school. A number of people have volunteered to donate labor and services once the project gets underway.

Minor repairs and interior work have been delayed pending the decision on the application, Rulison said.




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