

# Order won't issue results of Fr. Ritter probe

By Tracy Early  
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Franciscan Father Bruce Ritter's order announced March 29 that it had concluded its investigation of sexual allegations against him, but did not say whether it found him innocent or guilty.

The statement issued by provincial Father Conall McHugh and representing the decision of a five-member provincial council said only that Father Ritter, who had lived in a private apartment at Covenant House while serving as agency president, had been directed to "return to daily living with his Franciscan community."

He is a member of the Immaculate Conception Province of Conventual Franciscans, which has headquarters in Union City, N.J., and the council conducted the investigation as a private internal matter.

Father McHugh has declined to speak to reporters, and calls have been directed to others, principally his vicar, Father Juniper Alwell.

In a telephone interview March 30, Father Alwell said the statement was given to Father Ritter the day before it was released to the public.

Father Ritter, 63, was still engaging in the "rest and recuperation" at an undisclosed location that he earlier had been directed to take, Father Alwell said. But the vicar said provincial officials would "meet with Father Bruce soon" to discuss his future activity and the manner of his compliance with the decision that he must begin living in community.

The *New York Times* March 30 quoted an unnamed church official as saying Father Ritter would probably ask to leave the order. But Father Alwell said he had received no indication of that.

The *Times* also quoted Darryl J. Bassile, one of several young men who accused Father Ritter of sexual misconduct, as saying Franciscan officials "assured him that Father Ritter would no longer be working with young people."

Father Alwell said he had no knowledge

of such assurances.

While the investigation was under way, Father Ritter had declined Catholic News Service requests for an interview. Father Alwell said province officials had not directed him to refuse interviews, and he was free to tell reporters his side of the story if he wished.

The *Times* quoted Bassile as expressing disappointment with the statement by Father McHugh: "I wish he had said whether the accusations were true or false. To me this is just a nice way of bowing out without taking any responsibility. It's just a cop-out," he said.

Father Alwell emphasized the neutrality of the order's statement. If Father Ritter was given no exoneration, he said, neither was there a conviction.

Controversy over Father Ritter began Dec. 12, when the *New York Post* reported that Manhattan District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau was investigating allega-

tions by a young man, later identified as Kevin Lee Kite, 25, that Father Ritter established a sexual relationship with him and used Covenant House funds to support him.

Bassile then contacted Father McHugh's office and said Father Ritter had earlier pressured him into a similar relationship.

When Bassile got no response, he took his story to *The Times*, which carried a lengthy report on his and other charges Feb. 6. The same day, Father McHugh announced he had directed Father Ritter to take a leave from his Covenant House duties.

Father Alwell said the order had not intended to disregard Bassile's charges, but "lost contact with him for a while."

The day after Father Ritter resigned, Morgenthau announced that he had found "insufficient evidence" to prosecute, and was dropping his inquiry but that questionable financial dealings had surfaced.

New York State Attorney General Robert Abrams subsequently announced he was stepping up his investigation into that area.

The Abrams investigation is continuing, and involves in particular a charitable trust Father Ritter established and managed and his questionable use of the funds, which reached some \$900,000.

Although the trust was ostensibly to support Covenant House programs, no proceeds went to the agency until after Father Ritter's resignation.

James J. Harnett, then acting chief executive, told CNS March 21 Covenant House got its first income from the trust, \$50,000, March 16.

Father Alwell said the order would cooperate with law enforcement officials investigating questions about financial transactions at Covenant House, which has been conducting its own investigation.

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