

Release of hostages seen as breakthrough

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The brother of hostage Joseph Cicippio views the recent release of two Western hostages held in Lebanon as the long-awaited beginning of the end of the six-year-old hostage ordeal.

Thomas Cicippio, 67, of Norristown, Pa., a Philadelphia suburb, termed the freeing in early August of British hostage John McCarthy and U.S. hostage Edward Austin Tracy the "first major breakthrough" in the entire episode.

"It looks as though in the very near future the other hostages will also be released," Cicippio told Catholic News Service Aug. 12.

Cicippio's younger brother, Joseph, 60, who was abducted in 1986, a month before Tracy, was an American University administrator working in Beirut when he was captured by a group calling itself the Revolutionary Justice Organization.

The group had issued a statement Aug. 10 saying that either Joseph Cicippio or Tracy would be released in the next few days.

Since his abduction, one of Cicippio's sisters and Joseph Cicippio's son, Joseph Cicippio Jr., have died.

Another sister, Helen Fazio, 71, is gravely ill with ovarian cancer. "Her one wish is that she see Joseph" before she dies, said Thomas Cicippio.

Thomas Cicippio, a member of St.

Paul's Parish in Norristown, credited the recent progress in the hostage situation to the involvement of United Nations diplomats. Along with U.S., British and Syrian officials, he viewed the freeing of McCarthy and Tracy as initial steps in a carefully orchestrated, phased release of the 10 remaining Western hostages for Shiite prisoners held by Israel.

Cicippio charged, however, that the Bush administration appeared to be doing little "although we've been told many times it's a top priority" for the president.

He said he disagreed with those who would oppose making deals to achieve a hostage release, saying it had always been his conviction that "it takes a deal" to resolve this kind of situation.

McCarthy, a television producer held five years and released Aug. 8, handed over a letter from his captors, the Islamic Jihad organization, to U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, who has been thrust in the spotlight as the central figure in negotiations.

Tracy, a book salesman and author held almost five years, was released Aug. 11 by his Shiite Muslim captors and handed over to U.S. officials in Damascus, Syria.

Upon hearing that it had been Tracy rather than his brother who had been released, Cicippio, who has billboards with names of hostages and the number of days each has been held posted in his yard, said he hammered the word "freed" next to Tracy's name.



AP/Wide World Photos
In honor of former British hostage John McCarthy, released last week along with American hostage Edward Austin Tracy, parishioners of St. Brides Church on London's Fleet Street kept a lone candle burning. McCarthy, a television producer kidnapped more than five years ago, attended church at St. Brides.

He then updated the sign showing the number of days his brother has been held in captivity to 1,795.

Peggy Say, sister of U.S. hostage Terry Anderson, at an Aug. 10 news conference in Washington, pleaded with Joseph Cicippio's captors to release him.

"There isn't a hostage family, including myself," she said, "that given the choice of only one hostage, (wouldn't) want it to be Joe. His family has suffered much tragedy, and his sister Helen is dying now."

Cicippio told CNS his faith had "kept me going through the crisis with Joseph."

He said he was overwhelmed by the number of times his family has heard from churches that "continuously offer prayers for the hostages."

He described his brother as a "likeable person with a beaming personality" who has always had jobs "that involved taking care of a lot of people."

At one point in his career, Cicippio said, his brother worked for Meridian Bank in East Norriton, Pa., helping clients solve financial problems.

"I can't tell you how many people have stopped me and said, 'if it weren't for Joe I wouldn't have a house,'" he said.

Father Ritter leaves Franciscans for diocese in India

By Tracy Early
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Father Bruce Ritter, the Covenant House founder who resigned following charges of sexual and financial irregularities, has left the Franciscan order to become a diocesan priest in India.

According to a statement from his order, Father Ritter "on his own initiative and with the blessing of his Franciscan superiors in the United States and in Rome" requested and received as of July 3 permission from the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life to transfer from his order to the Diocese of Alleppey in Kerala, India.

Father Ritter, 64, entered the Franciscan order in 1950 and professed his vows the

following year, a spokesman for his province said.

The statement was signed by Father Giles Van Wormer, who in June succeeded Father Conall McHugh as head of Immaculate Conception Province. The provincial offices also were moved from Union City, N.J., to Staten Island.

Father Van Wormer was not available for comment, but his vicar, Father Denis Hackett, said in a telephone interview Aug. 12 that the statement was dated July 17, and had been held for whenever the story might break.

The *New York Daily News* broke the news in a story Aug. 12 by reporter Charles M. Sennott. He was the reporter, then at the *New York Post*, who first reported in December, 1989, that the Manhattan district attorney was investigating charges

Father Ritter had used Covenant House funds to support a young man with whom he had a sexual relationship.

Sennott quoted the provincial as saying, "We did our best to urge Father Bruce not to take this step. We believe he should have returned to the community and undergone full psychological counseling. We told him that no matter how bad it was, he was part of our family."

Father Canice Connors, who headed an internal investigation by the order into the allegations against Father Ritter, was quoted as saying:

"Father Ritter continues to want to control his own destiny. I think he is avoiding dealing with the problem and the issues at hand. Sadly, Father Ritter has resisted our help. We pray for him."

Upon the completion of the internal investigation, Father McHugh said Father Ritter had been directed to "return to daily living with his Franciscan community," but said nothing about the order's conclu-

sion regarding his guilt or innocence.

Father Hackett's confirmation of the Sennott story was apparently the first official indication that the order believed Father Ritter had a "problem" for which he should undergo "full psychological counseling."

Sennott reported that Father Ritter was living "in a white farmhouse on the gentle slope of a hill in a remote corner of New York state." The house belonged to a friend, and Father Ritter had been painting it, cutting wood and gardening, the article said.

A spokesman for New York State Attorney General Robert Abrams said Aug. 12 that Father Ritter's departure would not affect an ongoing investigation into the Franciscan Charitable Trust established by the priest.

Covenant House has said it expects to receive the assets, about \$1 million, when issues involving the trust are finally settled.

Knights endorse Judge Thomas

ST. LOUIS (CNS) — During their 109th Supreme Council convention Aug. 6-8, the Knights of Columbus adopted a resolution endorsing Judge Clarence Thomas' nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court.

"An examination of the record of Judge Clarence Thomas ... shows him to be exceptionally well-qualified for the position to which he has been nominated, having the proper judicial temperament, intellectual capacity and breadth of legal experience," said the resolution, which urged Knights to "contact their senators promptly, requesting them to support and confirm the nomination."

The Knights passed a similar resolution on behalf of Judge Robert H. Bork in 1987 and, in 1986 backed the nomination of Justice Antonin Scalia and the promotion of Justice William H. Rehnquist to chief justice.

In addition to the resolution on Thomas, the convention approved a resolution

pledging to keep the Knights "at the forefront of those groups and organizations committed to the defense of unborn human life."

Expressing hopes that the U.S. Supreme Court would overturn its *Roe vs. Wade* decision on abortion "in the near future," the Knights reaffirmed their policy of not honoring supporters of abortion, inviting them as speakers or allowing them to use or rent Knights facilities.

In other resolutions, the Knights:

- Affirmed their commitment to Catholic schools and praised President Bush's proposal for parental choice in education.

- Vowed to "take the lead in celebrating" the 500th anniversary in 1992 of Columbus' voyage to America and to "ensure this event is a complete success in stimulating our membership to new heights in spreading our Catholic faith and our principles: charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism."

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