

Shock lingers after standoff's fiery end

Leader reportedly ordered inferno

By Carol Zimmermann
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The deadly and violent end to the cult standoff in Waco, Texas, "fills me with sadness and anger," said an Austin parishioner who organized a prayer vigil near the Branch Davidian compound.

"What saddens me the most is that in the name of Christianity, and religion, people were killed. This touches me in the deepest place of where I live," said Michael Guerra, a lay minister at St. Austin's Parish, in an April 20 telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

On April 19, cult leader David Koresh reportedly ordered a mass suicide that took more than 80 lives in an inferno at his Texas compound after federal agents attacked with tanks and tear gas.

"David Koresh, we believe, gave the order to commit suicide and they (his followers) all followed willingly," FBI agent Bob Ricks said during an April 19 press conference. Later reports said some cult members might have been shot by other cult members while trying to escape the fire.

Federal authorities had tried for 51 days to avoid such an ending, repeatedly saying they were willing to wait out the standoff that started with a Feb. 28 raid on the cult's compound.

"The death of the members of the Branch Davidians is a very tragic event and of course we are saddened by it," said Austin Bishop John E. McCarthy in a statement released April 20.

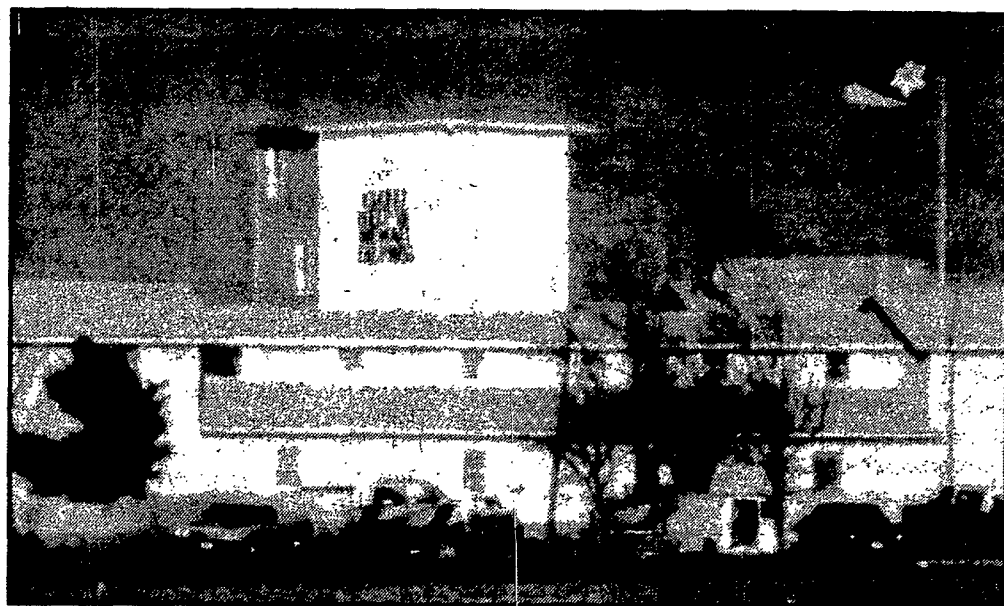
The bishop said the "most painful part" of the tragedy was the loss of innocent lives — the children and adults in the compound and the federal agents who died in a Feb. 28 shootout with cult members.

"We offer our prayers to all the victims and their families as well as those who have spent nearly two months dealing with this situation," he said.

After weeks of tactics that included cutting off electricity and telephone lines and blasting music, the FBI used tanks to poke holes in the compound buildings and spray tear gas inside, hoping to force out the 95 people — including 17 children — inside the compound.

The tactic was designed to make the compound occupants uncomfortable, but it turned into a nightmare when three separate fires were started that quickly engulfed the buildings, leaving a pile of smoldering rubble that was still igniting ammunition and explosives well after the fire had subsided. Nine people survived, including a woman who left the compound in flames.

Guerra, who prayed and fasted near the location of the cult's compound in mid-March, described the area as one



AP/Wide World Photos
This picture of the Branch Davidian cult's compound in Waco, Texas was taken back on March 10. The compound went up in a fiery blaze April 19 after cult leader David Koresh reportedly ordered a mass suicide. The inferno took more than 80 lives after federal agents moved in with tanks.

of "intense dislocation and sadness."

"There was not a bit of joy. No one wanted to be there," he said, in reference to the reporters and federal agents.

During the fourth day of the vigil, Guerra said he received a phone call from Bishop McCarthy, suggesting that it would be better for Catholics to pray and fast in the privacy of their homes.

"I think he was afraid the media might interpret our efforts as part of a theatrical circus" instead of the prayer it was meant to be, Guerra said.

He said it was painful to leave the location near the compound because he wanted to "be a light" to those involved in the incident and stand in

contrast to the messages given by Koresh.

He said the reaction in the Austin area to the end of the standoff is mixed. "There has been a real growing uneasiness that this has gone on too long and also there has been concern for the innocence of the people in there. People are torn between the dichotomy of innocent life and the call for justice," he said.

During the standoff, Guerra said he learned that the Branch Davidian group was formed as a nonviolent group to live an alternative lifestyle.

"Waco citizens knew them to be pacifists," he said. "But the great irony is that they ultimately ended in this violence."

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Cardinal calls for reconciliation after verdict

LOS ANGELES (CNS) — Following the split verdict in the Rodney King beating trial, Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles urged city residents to find ways to bridge "the gaps and chasms that still divide us."

"Now is a time for hope and reconciliation," he said in an April 17 statement issued after a jury convicted police Sgt. Stacey Koon and Officer Laurence Powell of violating King's civil rights by using or permitting excessive force in the 1991 beating. Officer Theodore Briseno and former Officer Timothy Wind were acquitted.

"It is imperative that each of us ask,

'How might I promote healing and reconciliation on my own block and in my own neighborhood?'" Cardinal Mahony said. "Now is our opportunity to make a personal commitment to identify specific ways of bridging the gaps and chasms that still divide us."

The cardinal said the riots after the April 1992 acquittal of the four police officers in a state trial "demonstrated very clearly that a violent response to the verdicts will not and cannot serve the cause of justice and equality."

The 1992 verdicts sparked three days of rioting in Los Angeles, leaving 53 people dead and causing \$2 billion in damage.

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