

WORLD & NATION

Former Fisher president knew UFO cult leader

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Father Patrick O. Braden, CSB, former president of St. John Fisher College in Rochester, said the leader of a California UFO cult never betrayed signs of his destiny while he taught at another university where Braden presided.

Father Braden served as president of the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, from 1967 to 1979, where Marshall Herff Applewhite founded the school's music department in the late 1960s.

Along with 38 of his followers, Applewhite, 66, was found dead last week in a mass suicide that took place around March 26 near San Diego, Calif.

"He was a marvelous teacher, a charismatic guy," Father Braden said of Applewhite. "He could get the students with comparatively little talent to sing."

Father Braden said one of his nephews married a student of Applewhite's. The priest noted that he spoke to his nephew's wife last week about the cult leader's death, and that she agreed with him about Applewhite's impressive teaching abilities.

Father Braden made his remarks during a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from Houston, where he is currently president emeritus of St. Thomas and a part-time teacher. Before returning to Houston, the priest served as Fisher president from 1981 to 1986, and then spent four years in a Basilian mission on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia.

Father Braden said that in 1970 Applewhite requested a leave of absence at St. Thomas because of "emotional problems." Contrary to what some reports have alleged, Father Braden said the university had no knowledge that Applewhite had engaged in an affair with a male student.

"It was definitely not that," Father Braden said. "He told me that he was acting rather strangely. He was suffering from some problems."

Applewhite remained on a paid leave for one year after he left the university, Father Braden said, adding that the university paid him on a monthly basis during the leave. But all contact between St. Thomas and the future cult leader ended after he requested



Heaven's Gate leader Marshall Herff Applewhite, appears in a videotape made just before he and 38 followers committed suicide in a Southern California mansion.

that the university give him a final lump sum payment which, Father Braden recalled, Applewhite told the school would be used to set up a coffee shop.

"I have had no contact with him since our business office sent him the final salary," Father Braden said.

Meanwhile, a Catholic expert on cult behavior said the 39 members of Heaven's Gate who committed mass suicide fit the cult pattern of people "seeking a better way of life who would do anything to get there."

"It does fit the pattern of the cult phenomenon today," said Father James J. LeBar, Catholic chaplain at the Hudson River Psychiatric Center in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and consultant for the Archdiocese of New York on cult matters.

"And unfortunately (it) reached the ultimate conclusion when they gave up or lost their lives," he said.

Father LeBar said reports that members used no alcohol or drugs and lived celibately also fit the pattern. All this would be "for the sake of that which is to come," he said.

The victims — 21 women and 18 men — were found lying peacefully on cots and bunks in a million-dollar mansion in the exclusive gated community of Rancho Santa

Fe, Calif. A triangular purple cloth shrouded the face and chest of each, with the single point of the triangle pointing downward.

They were dressed alike in dark pants and black tennis shoes with similar buzz-cut hairstyles, which initially led investigators to describe them as mostly young men. As it turned out, most were in their 40s, and more than half were women.

Police now believe victims died in stages after taking a drug-alcohol cocktail.

According to William D. Dinges, associate professor of religion and religious education at The Catholic University of America in Washington, cults used to draw constituents from the underclass but in the last 30 years began attracting middle-class and upper-middle-class members.

Dinges said the group's isolation and apparent financial success were consistent with modern cults.

The house where members lived and died also was the operating center for their business, called Higher Source, which designed Internet Web sites.

"(Cults) tend to isolate and enshroud themselves with mystery," Dinges said. "The psychological and social isolation will reinforce the paranoia of the group."

It's not uncommon for cult groups to be relatively efficient as financial enterprises, he said, "because they have a dedicated cadre of workers."

Web-site customers of Higher Source reported they were happy with the group's computer designs.

The group's own Web site, also called Heaven's Gate, contains quotes about the significance of the Hale-Bopp comet — now visible across the Northern Hemisphere — and images of stars and nebulae, along with straightforward business information.

"I'm struck by the apparent Gnostic aspects of a group like this," said Dinges, who teaches a course on sects, cults and new religious movements. "It's composed of people who assume they have some knowledge of something not available to others."

According to former members and videos sent out by the group just before the mass suicide, Heaven's Gate members thought it was time to shed their "containers" and rendezvous with a UFO they believed was traveling behind Hale-Bopp.

Father LeBar said the group may have had "some idea that the end of the world might be coming or the New Age concept that they could space travel or do anything they wanted." He said doomsday groups often are told to watch for a sign.

For this group, Dinges said, the comet may have been "a literal reading of the stars."

The Rev. Bruce G. Epperly, a United Church of Christ minister and adjunct professor of theology at Georgetown University in Washington, said people attracted to cults often are very idealistic and looking for something to believe in or for a type of spiritual transformation.

"Outer space entities behind Hale-Bopp might have seemed like something to believe in," said the minister, who also directs Protestant ministry at Georgetown and is the university's self-described "watchdog" on cults.

This article contains additional reporting by Rob Cullivan.

Salvadorans remember martyred archbishop

By Mike Lanchin
Catholic News Service

SAN SALVADOR — Catholics across El Salvador commemorated the 17th anniversary of the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, whose beatification process is currently under way in Rome.

Once described as the "most hated and most loved man in El Salvador," Archbishop Romero was gunned down by a rightist death squad while saying Mass in a San Salvador chapel March 24, 1980.

"Those of us who shared his ideals knew that Archbishop Romero was incapable of showing hatred, or promoting violence," said Father Jesus Delgado during a Mass celebrated March 24 in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in the capital.

Father Delgado told worshippers, among them Archbishop Fernando Saenz Lacalle of San Salvador, "Let's hope that when the political passions have come and gone, history will do justice to Romero for who he was. Let's hope that we, too, know how to judge him from this same perspective."

Parishes around the country celebrated Mass for Archbishop Romero. In the capital, an all-night vigil was held the weekend before the anniversary. An ecumenical service was also held March 24, in the El Rosario Church in downtown San Salvador, a few blocks from the cathedral in which the archbishop buried.

Archbishop Romero's murder, at a time of growing repression by the security forces, threw the country into a spiral of violence leading to 12 years of civil war.

His change from being a close associate of the ruling aristocracy to one of its most

fierce critics soon after his appointment in 1977 earned him death threats from opponents and adoration from the poor. His weekly homilies became a platform for denouncing social injustices and military repression.

In his last sermon, March 23, 1980, Archbishop Romero called upon soldiers "in the name of God" to disobey their superiors' orders to kill innocent people.

A U.N.-appointed Truth Commission, set up at the end of the civil war in 1992, identified former Major Roberto D'Aubuisson,

founder of the governing rightist ARENA party, as having ordered Archbishop Romero's killing.

D'Aubuisson, who denied the charges, died of throat cancer in February 1992.

The sainthood cause for Archbishop Romero was begun six years ago and is currently under consideration at the Vatican.

Last November the Archdiocese of San Salvador officially terminated the diocesan stage of the process, initiated in 1993, and sent all of its relevant documentation on the archbishop to Rome.

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