

Swiss Guard commander, wife shot to death

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In what the Vatican called a crime of "momentary insanity," the new commander of the Swiss Guard and his wife were shot to death in their Vatican apartment, apparently by a disgruntled guard member who then killed himself.

Vatican officials discovered the bodies of all three late on May 4 after a neighbor reported loud noises. The Vatican immediately ordered autopsies and, after an initial investigation, said it was treating the case as a double murder and suicide.

Slain were Alois Estermann, 43, and Gladys Meza Romero, 47, his Venezuelan

wife of 14 years, who lived in an apartment just below the pope's own residential building. Estermann had been appointed commander of the Swiss Guard only hours earlier by Pope John Paul II.

Investigators discovered the body of Cedrich Tornay, a 23-year-old member of the elite papal corps, near the other victims in a receiving room of the Estermann home. The Vatican said the only weapon found was Tornay's standard-issue, 9-caliber pistol. The gun lay under Tornay's body, and five shots appeared to have been fired from it.

"The most likely hypothesis — much more than a hypothesis at this point — is that of momentary insanity in a person with deep feelings that he was unappreciated in the corps," said Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls.

He said Tornay was resentful at having been rebuked by Estermann more than once, including a formal reprimand in February for staying out all night. Tornay was also disappointed at being passed over for a promotion, the spokesman said.

After Estermann's appointment was announced May 4, Tornay had complained about the commander to fellow guards,

and later prepared a letter which he left behind for his relatives.

Navarro-Valls said the Vatican was conducting its investigation without the assistance of Italian judicial authorities, but he noted that, if needed, such assistance could be requested.

Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican secretary of state, was to celebrate a funeral Mass in St. Peter's Basilica May 6. The Vatican did not specify whether the liturgy would be held for the Estermanns alone.

It was the first murder inside the Vatican in more than 150 years. The pope was awakened and informed of the tragedy, and immediately went to pray in his private chapel.

"The Holy Father was very moved, visibly saddened. He made some very positive comments about the commander, which unfortunately Estermann will never hear," Navarro-Valls said.

In a telegram to Estermann's parents, the pope offered his condolences and prayers, and expressed his great sadness at the deaths.

Estermann, an 18-year-veteran of the Swiss Guard, accompanied Pope John

Paul on more than 30 of his foreign trips. When the pope was shot in St. Peter's Square in 1981, Estermann was at his side, trying to protect the pontiff.

Those who knew Estermann described him as a serious, cordial and generous man, who could sometimes be seen strolling arm-in-arm with his wife in the neighborhood around the Vatican. He spoke five languages, had earned a theology degree and written about spirituality, and was a postulator for a German sainthood cause.

His wife had degrees in canon law and civil law from a Rome pontifical university. The couple had no children.

Estermann had been vice-commander of the Swiss Guard since 1989, and had temporarily administered the corps over the last several months while the Vatican conducted a search for a new commander.

The choice of Estermann was made public at the Vatican two days before the annual swearing-in ceremony of new Swiss Guard recruits. After the murders, the Vatican postponed the ceremony indefinitely, and said many of the expected guests would attend the funeral instead.

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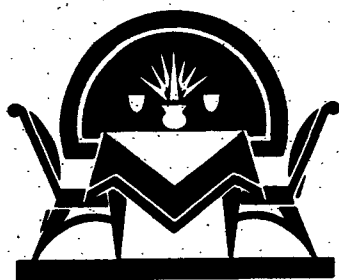
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