

Priest visits strip bar, dies of heart attack

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BY DANIEL LEBLANC

Jean-Claude Snyder lived most of his years in the house of God, but he died last week in a house of ill repute.

The retired priest from Ottawa suffered a heart attack last Wednesday in a private booth at a notorious strip bar in Mont-Laurier, 150 kilometres north of Hull. The club was raided the next day by Quebec police and its owner, André Lajeunesse, charged with running a brothel.

Mr. Snyder, 71, had served as a priest in Marionville, Alfred and St. Isidore, all small communities east of Ottawa with deep Catholic roots. His funeral this week was presided over by Archbishop Marcel Gervais.



SNYDER

The place Mr. Snyder died, Le Mandarin, was marked by a gaudy M-shaped roof and caricatured Asian man, a sign in French advertising "cute dancers" and darkened booths where patrons can buy a lap dance for \$10.

According to Mr. Lajeunesse, it was a first-time visit for Mr. Snyder, who had apparently been staying with a friend in Mont-Laurier for a few days.

"Mr. Snyder is a client that I had never seen here before," says Mr. Lajeunesse. "Around 8 o'clock, a dancer offered to do things, or he asked, I don't know. They went to the cabin, where he felt ill ... Getting a dance, maybe he wanted to see what it looked like once in his life. Maybe he was curious, maybe he never saw that."

Clients and staff at the bar did everything to keep Mr. Snyder alive after he fell to the floor, says Mr. Lajeunesse.

"I've been trained in first aid and we had two people who were recently trained in CPR. Someone called an ambulance right away. We loosened his tie. We did everything we could to help him out."

The Mandarin had been under police surveillance for five months. The Sûreté du Québec says the raid had been planned well before the priest's death.

"The Mandarin had been under watch since October 1997, concerning possible acts of prostitution in the bar. The illegal acts would have taken place in the booths," says Sgt. Gilles Couture. Ten people were arrested during the sting, including five dancers to be charged with solicitation.

One waitress and four clients were arrested for being in a brothel. One client, who attacked police with a tele-

phone, will face charges of assault.

Mr. Lajeunesse admits that his establishment offers \$10 dances that involve contact between the client and the dancer. But he denies any charge of prostitution at his club.

"I ask the girls to keep it straight. We try to make sure that the \$10 dances are as straight as possible. What goes on in a hotel afterwards, it's not my problem. That's outside my establishment," he says.

"It's not hell here," he adds, noting that Le Mandarin serves as a kind of "international bar" because it lies at the crossroads of numerous snowmobile trails.

Mr. Snyder was the priest at the St. Isidore church from 1980 to 1992, when health problems forced him to quit.

"He had problems with his heart. In the end, that's what killed him," says Guy Levac, spokesman for the Archdiocese of Ottawa.

He says Mr. Snyder had studied in Paris and became a priest in 1952. After his retirement, he lived in Ottawa at a Catholic residence along with a dozen other retired priests.

The funeral for Mr. Snyder was held Monday at the Notre Dame Cathedral. Up to about one hour before the ceremony, says Mr. Levac, Archbishop Gervais was under the impression that Mr. Snyder had passed away in a restaurant. He was surprised by the news, but decided the memorial service should go on as planned.

"If someone makes a mistake or a judgment error, it doesn't change the good that he has made over his life. Mr. Snyder gave his life to the church and did his best to serve his parishioners," Archbishop Gervais said in a statement.

Mr. Snyder has one brother who lives in the Montreal area and one sister in the Ottawa area. There were also many friends, colleagues and former students at Mr. Snyder's funeral. His body was buried in his home town of St. Albert.

Roger Morin, chancellor for the Archdiocese, says he saw Mr. Snyder two days before his death. He says he has nothing bad to say about the man, that "he has been faithful to his duties" throughout a long career in the priesthood.

"God said 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged yourself,'" says Mr. Morin. "We are all humans, we all have our limits."

Since the police raid at Le Mandarin, the club has remained open to patrons but the walls of the private booths have been cut in half to expose the interior, says Mr. Lajeunesse. He says there were never doors or curtains on the cubicles.

"It's very open."