

# Let us prey

## The Calgary Catholic diocese is sheltering a priest wanted for fraud in Ontario » by JOE WOODARD

For almost two years, with the full knowledge of his superiors, a Catholic priest now serving and teaching in the Calgary area has had a warrant out for his arrest in Ontario, on a charge of fraud over \$5,000. He also lost the nestegg of a widowed Ontario parishioner, and has threatened her legally for "harassing" him about it. Nonetheless, Calgary church officials are content to keep him.

Father Mark Patrick Buckley, 38, was charged in 1998 for allegedly misappropriating \$69,635.01 from his previous posting, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Grafton in the Diocese of Peterborough. Before the charge was laid, however, he had already left Ontario to work for Calgary Bishop Frederick Henry, who had earlier taught him at St. Peter's Seminary in London, Ont.

"We are aware of the accusation against Fr. Buckley," says Calgary diocesan spokesman Father John Schuster. "And as far as we are concerned, he is innocent until proven guilty."

Constable Susan Storry of the North Humberland Ontario Provincial Police Detachment confirms that the fraud charge is still outstanding. It has not been enforced, probably because he is out of province. And Fr. Buckley's Toronto lawyer, James L. Hill, expects the arrest warrant will be withdrawn. Peterborough Bishop James Doyle is apparently uninterested in seeing the charge pursued.

The alleged misappropriation of parish funds was discovered in a June 1997 audit of the parish accounts, commissioned by disgruntled members after Fr. Buckley declared personal bankruptcy and left town. Cobourg chartered accountant James Berg discovered a number of "unusual transactions" for personal purposes totalling \$69,635.01.

After teaching in the Calgary Catholic system in 1998-99, Fr. Buckley has become principal of Holy Spirit Academy

in High River. His boss, Christ the Redeemer School District superintendent Ron Wallace, says, "I was aware of the financial difficulties Fr. Buckley was in before he came to us. It was my judgment then, and it is now, that they would not impede him in his duties. He has performed excellent service for us and has my full confidence as a Catholic educator."



Priest, principal and pet-merchant Buckley; Welcomed in High River; wanted in North Humberland.

When asked whether Fr. Buckley would be encouraged to make restitution, Mr. Wallace answered, "I believe that's for Father to decide," and he added that Fr. Buckley has come to some agreement with the Peterborough diocese, for the eventual repayment of his debt.

Barbara MacKerrow, 75, of Barrie, Ont., has been less fortunate, however. In February 1995, about a year after her husband's death, Fr. Buckley approached her in the front pew of the church and

asked her to lend him money to open a pet store. By October he had borrowed \$202,000 from her and had opened pet stores in Grafton and Cobourg. He had also purchased rabbits, ducks, turkeys, angora goats, purebred Dobermans (for breeding) and two riding horses (for personal use). The stores went broke and she has received not a penny in repayment.

One factor which might have helped sink the pet enterprise was the amount of time the priest spent away. In January 1996, he took a 10-day vacation in Mexico, followed shortly after by a two-week tour of Hong Kong, Hawaii and San Francisco. Upon his return he asked the widow for another \$50,000, suggesting she mortgage her house to raise it. This she declined to do. So in March 1996, he informed his parishioners that he would be attending a week-long retreat in Ottawa, and returned to Mexico.

Two months later, he was helping a friend, Sean Overy, open a beauty salon in the nearby town of Whitby. That summer he was buying and furnishing himself a cottage on nearby Little Lake. In the fall he helped a parishioner open a restaurant. By now, however, his parishioners were getting quite alarmed by his management of their churches, and the pet stores were in trouble.

In January 1997, the priest returned to Mexico for a three-week holiday. Mrs. MacKerrow then filed a statement of claim in court to recover her money. In March Fr. Buckley declared bankruptcy.

If Fr. Buckley had been a psychologist borrowing money from a patient, his professional association would almost automatically have expelled him for breach of trust. All Mr. Hill, his lawyer, will say is, "She made a bad business investment." The widow tried suing the Peterborough diocese for the priest's breach of a trust relationship, but ran out of money and abandoned the action.

Mrs. MacKerrow tries to remain philosophical about her ruin. "My daughter told me I'd better not die," she quips, "because when I go to heaven my husband will kill me." She continues to attend church.

Fr. Buckley declined to be interviewed. ■