

Church music director charged in N.Y. man's murder

Publication Northwest Herald  
Date April 14, 2004  
Section(s) Local News  
Page

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GENEVA - The music director at St. Peter Catholic Church was jailed Tuesday in New York and accused of killing his former lover nearly five years ago.

Michael Pavone, 58, is charged with murder, criminal possession of a weapon, and criminal mischief in connection with the grisly slaying of Keith A. Sutherland, Erie County, N.Y., Deputy District Attorney Joseph Marusak said.

Sutherland, 45, of Buffalo, N.Y., was found repeatedly stabbed and beaten Oct. 21, 1999, floating in a pond in the Tiffit Nature Preserve on the city's south side near where his car was found with its windows and headlights smashed.

Pavone surrendered Monday to Buffalo police, about one week after authorities said new evidence from a jailhouse informant linked him to the unsolved crime, Buffalo defense attorney Edward C. Cosgrove said.

The arrest stunned members of St. Peter's congregation, who still are reeling from the controversy stirred by a former priest accused of sexual abuse that allegedly occurred in Geneva the same year as the killing in New York.

Pavone, of West Chicago, has pleaded innocent to the offenses,

which occurred after he unsuccessfully tried to rekindle a soured romantic relationship with Sutherland, his former roommate, Marusak said.

"I know the Buffalo Police Department worked awfully hard and didn't drop the ball on this and kept going," Marusak said. "They're pleased."

Since his arrest, Pavone has been jailed pending a bond hearing scheduled for today.

Prosecutors contacted Cosgrove on March 30 and said a grand jury had indicted Pavone on the charges earlier that month. Pavone then arranged to return to New York after Holy Week events at St. Peter, Cosgrove said.

Pavone was never a fugitive, but investigators have wanted to talk with him since Sutherland's death. They were halted when he overdosed on pills and was hospitalized as a suicide risk after Sutherland's body was found, Marusak said.

About one year later, harassment and publicity forced Pavone to quit his job as music director at the Nativity of Our Lord Catholic Church in Orchard Park, N.Y., and move from the south Buffalo suburb of Hamburg, Cosgrove said.

"[Pavone] wishes he never got involved with this character," Cosgrove said. "I don't know what will happen, but my client says he didn't have any involvement."

Described as a talented musician and trustworthy to a fault, Pavone worked at several churches in the Midwest before taking the job at St. Peter, Cosgrove said.

Pavone was hired at St. Peter on Aug. 1, 2003, and served without incident. He recently was fired for reasons unrelated to his criminal case, church officials said.

"He was dismissed this week because he misrepresented his employment history when he applied for the post and then lied when questioned about the misrepresentation," Rama Canney, a church spokeswoman, said in a statement.

The Rev. Joe Jarmoluk of St. Peter declined to comment on the latest allegations to involve a member of the highly popular parish that draws its 2,400-family congregation from throughout the Tri-Cities.

A former priest at St. Peter, Mark A. Campobello, 39, of Belvidere, is accused of molesting a 14-year-old girl in 1999 who attended the church. Campobello is scheduled to stand trial May 24.

Meanwhile, some parishioners said Tuesday that they were waylaid by news of Pavone's arrest.

"I think it's all the devil's work. ... It's just one more thing," said Sue Arnold of Geneva. "I think part of it makes the parish stronger and pulls us closer together."

Another parishioner, Kathryn Rock of Geneva, also was surprised to learn of the charges but said the music director reportedly caused controversy among the choir members.

"I suppose I am pretty shocked, but everyone thought something fishy was going on somewhere," Rock said. "It's all been too weird."

If convicted, Pavone could be sentenced to 25 years to life in prison.

Sutherland had vanished for three days when he was reported missing. Investigators said Sutherland had been dead for several days when his body was found, Marusak said.

Marusak said investigators think that Sutherland was stabbed with a "sharp-edged instrument" but declined to comment if a weapon has been recovered.

At the time of his death, Sutherland lived with his sister at a Buffalo transitional housing complex and worked at a now-closed Ames department store in Blasdell, N.Y., Marusak said.

Pavone has no criminal history and maintains that someone else killed Sutherland. He also is supported by several former parishioners in New York who are "horrified" by the allegations, said Cosgrove, a former Erie County District Attorney.

"This is a very odd bit of circumstances," Cosgrove said.