

Bishop Pelotte moved to Houston hospital to be near his brother

WASHINGTON – Bishop Donald E. Pelotte of Gallup, N.M., has been moved to a Houston hospital closer to where his brother lives, after spending more than two weeks in a Phoenix hospital recovering from injuries he said he sustained in a fall at his home July 22.

In an Aug. 9 posting on the diocesan Web site, Deacon Timoteo Lujan, chancellor, said Bishop Pelotte was transferred the day before to Memorial Hermann Texas Medical Center for ongoing treatment of traumatic head injuries.

Deacon Lujan also reported that the diocese had hired an Albuquerque law firm after New Mexico news media sought copies of photos of the bishop with his injuries.

The Gallup city attorney asked a state judge to decide if the police department is obligated to release to the news media photos of the bishop's injuries taken by police at the Gallup hospital where he was first evaluated.

Deacon Lujan's memo quoted a letter to the police department from attorney Luis G. Stelzner saying the diocese "will assist and cooperate in any way it can" if the police department decides to further investigate Bishop Pelotte's injuries.

Bishop Pelotte, 62, was found badly injured at his home July 23 by Deacon Lujan, who let himself into the residence when the bishop missed appointments that day and failed to answer phone calls.

Emergency room personnel at Gallup's Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital called police to investigate "a possible battery to a person" based on the extent of the bishop's injuries.

The Gallup police report cited injuries including bruising around the eyes and on one shoulder, as well as on his legs, arms, elbows, hands and knuckles.

Bishop Pelotte assured police that he had fallen on the stairs at his home and made his way back to his bedroom, where Deacon Lujan found him. The police report said

no further investigation was planned, based upon the bishop's statement that he had fallen while alone in his house. A second officer took photos of his injuries, a routine procedure in such investigations.

Later that day, Bishop Pelotte was airlifted to the John C. Lincoln Hospital in Phoenix, where he spent a week in intensive care before being transferred to a private room.

Subsequent statements from the diocese have said the bishop was resting comfortably, and that doctors told the bishop's family it was too soon to determine how long his full recovery might take or what course of treatment would be followed. They also said the bishop's injuries made it difficult for him to speak and that the injuries, "although extensive, are consistent with injuries sustained by falling down a staircase with a ceramic tile floor. He hit the wall."

One statement noted that there were no signs of a struggle, forced entry, the presence of another person or items missing from the bishop's home.

The Gallup Independent newspaper in its Aug. 4-5 edition called for police to investigate further, saying "everything that has been made public seems to indicate that (Bishop) Pelotte was involved in a violent fight that night."

The Associated Press reported Aug. 9 that at least two media outlets have requested access to the police photos. The city said the photos are not public record because they were taken after the official investigation ended. AP cited documents filed with the state court on behalf of the diocese saying any publication of the photos "would serve no purpose but to sensationalize what is a very private matter."

Stelzner, the diocese's attorney, also said releasing the photos taken at the hospital would violate privacy rules covered by the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, commonly known as HIPAA, according to AP.

The Aug. 9 memo from the diocese said among the factors in the decision to move Bishop Pelotte to Memorial Hermann Hospital was that his twin brother, Father Dana Pelotte, is pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Houston. Father Pelotte had been at the Phoenix hospital nearly every day since his brother arrived.

Both men are members of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, which maintains a community house in Houston, the memo said.

The Houston hospital's Web site notes that among its specialties is "medical rehabilitation for individuals who have suffered catastrophic injury or illness such as brain injury, spinal cord injury or multiple traumas."

Vicar general Father James E. Walker has assumed administrative responsibilities for the Gallup Diocese.

Bishop Pelotte, one of the nation's two American Indian Catholic bishops, has headed the Gallup Diocese since 1990, after serving there as coadjutor bishop since 1986.

The Pelotte brothers were born April 13, 1945, in Waterville, Maine. Their father was an Abenaki Indian. Bishop Pelotte was the first American Indian to be named a bishop in the United States. (Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver was the second.)

The Diocese of Gallup encompasses 55,000 square miles in northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona, including the Navajo and Hopi Indian reservations.