

Community mourns death of Jesuit and his hiking companion

PORTLAND, Ore. – Family, friends and Jesuit communities are mourning the death of a California Jesuit priest and his hiking companion. The pair had been missing in Oregon since June 8.

Authorities found the bodies of Father David Schwartz, 52, and Cheryl Gibbs, 61, just off a highway in the northwest part of the state July 1.

They apparently died when their car ran off the road and rolled into a hidden ditch during a return trip to Portland from the Oregon coast. Thousands of motorists drive by the spot each day, but the crashed auto was not visible except by airplane.

Tom Mulligan, Father Schwartz's brother-in-law, was at the scene and told Portland's KATU-TV that the family was saddened but was grateful for closure after a long statewide search.

Everyone who knows the pair confirmed that their relationship was platonic. Authorities began to focus their efforts on the northern coast when they learned the two made a stop June 8 at the Tillamook Cheese Factory, a popular tourist stop where guests can sign a register.

Father Schwartz and Gibbs were last seen that day at a hotel near the Portland airport. Their car and items for a day trip were gone, but the rest of their belongings were still in their hotel rooms.

Father Schwartz, a graduate of Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash., was ordained at St. Mary Cathedral in San Francisco and was a parish priest in Los Gatos, Calif., for 10 years. His most recent assignment was at a retreat center in Orange County. He also serves as a chaplain in the local hospital.

Gibbs was a longtime coroner's supervisor in Alameda County, Calif.

Since May, the two had been traveling in Nevada, California, Idaho and eastern Washington. They were to continue on to Bend, Ore., and Crater Lake. Neither carried a cell phone.

Margarette Schwartz, 78, came to Oregon from Sacramento, Calif., and spent the better part of a week searching for her son, who had wanted to be a priest since at least the eighth grade. The mother of eight knew something was wrong when her dependable priest-son did not show up at her home June 16 as planned.

In a rented car, she and another son and a son-in-law investigated the state's tourist destinations: the Columbia Gorge, Mount Hood, Silver Creek Falls.

She also went down hundreds of miles of back roads, posting fliers on poles and handing them out at Catholic parishes. The priest's father, a retired homicide detective, also helped in the search.

The family clung to hope that the two were lost in the woods alive. Police received almost 100 tips before narrowing down the location for the search, but before that scoured trailheads and river areas. The National Guard and state police also helped.

"Like any community and any family, we are devastated by this news," Jesuit Father Paul Janowiak, an official for the Oregon province of Jesuits, told the Catholic Sentinel, newspaper of the Portland Archdiocese.

"(Jesuit) communities all over are praying. We can only imagine what the family, especially his parents, are going through," he said.

Jesuit Father Anastacio Rivera called Father Schwartz "a highly competent and esteemed member" of the staff at Loyola Institute in the town of Orange, Calif.

Father Rivera, the institute's assistant director, said the pair's disappearance, followed by news of their death, left institute employees "profoundly saddened."