

Professor priest found murdered in outskirts of Rome

By Laura Ieraci

Catholic News Service

ROME - Italian military police are investigating the murder of a 60-year-old priest and theologian, who taught at two pontifical universities in Rome. According to media reports, Father Lanfranco Rossi was found face down in a pool of blood in the hazelnut grove near his community's retreat center in San Feliciano, just outside of Zagarolo, about 21 miles south of Italy's capital.

An autopsy found that the priest suffered several blows to the head with a blunt object and was strangled; there were no signs of a struggle. Police say the priest's death of asphyxiation was not immediate, though his assailant left him for dead. Theft has been excluded as a possible motive for the murder.

According to an April 20 report, published by the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, the priest was found dead April 12 by members of his community, who did not see him at the center that morning; the murder is believed to have taken place during the night of April 11.

A resident of Rome, Father Rossi was on a weekend retreat at the center. He was known to suffer from insomnia and to go into the woods at night to meditate.

Father Rossi was a professor of spirituality at both the Pontifical Gregorian University and the Pontifical Oriental Institute. He belonged to a new and very small community of priests, called the "Ricostruttori nella preghiera" (Rebuilders in Prayer), which promotes the deep meditative practice of hesychasm, which is a form of Eastern Christian ascetic spirituality.

In a message on the association's website April 19, the superior, Father Roberto Rondanina, says members are "united in grief" over Father Rossi's death and will

follow the developments in the investigation “with great attention.” In a previous message, the superior said Father Rossi was “appreciated and respected by colleagues and students” as a scholar, as well as by those for whom he was a “point of reference” on spiritual matters.

Founded by the late Jesuit Father Gian Vittorio Cappelletto in 1978, the association follows a strict ascetic life. Members live in radical poverty, sleep on the floor and follow a vegetarian diet. The association was approved by the Diocese of La Spezia in 1989.

With Father Rossi’s death, the association is comprised of 28 priests. Father Rossi’s funeral was held April 18.

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