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ROBINSON TRIAL

Priest found guilty; cleric gets 15 years to life in nun's murder

Jury takes 6 hours to reach decision

By DAVID YONKE
BLADE RELIGION
EDITOR

A murder case unsolved for 26 years was brought to an unexpectedly quick and dramatic end yesterday after jurors convicted a 68-year-old Toledo priest, Gerald Robinson, in the brutal, ritualistic murder of a nun.

The 12 jurors in the Lucas County Common Pleas Court trial deliberated just over six hours before reaching a unanimous verdict.

Judge Oswik then asked Robinson if he wished to say anything and the priest — who did not take the witness stand and never spoke during the three-week trial — declined. The jammed courtroom was eerily silent but for an immediate gasp, followed by the stifled sobs of the priest's sister-in-law, Barbara Robinson of Toledo.



From left, attorney Alan Konop, the Rev. Gerald Robinson, and attorneys John Thebes and Nicole Khoury react to the verdict. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

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Barbara Robinson, sister-in-law of the Rev. Gerald Robinson, listens to the guilty verdict and sentence in the 1980 murder. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

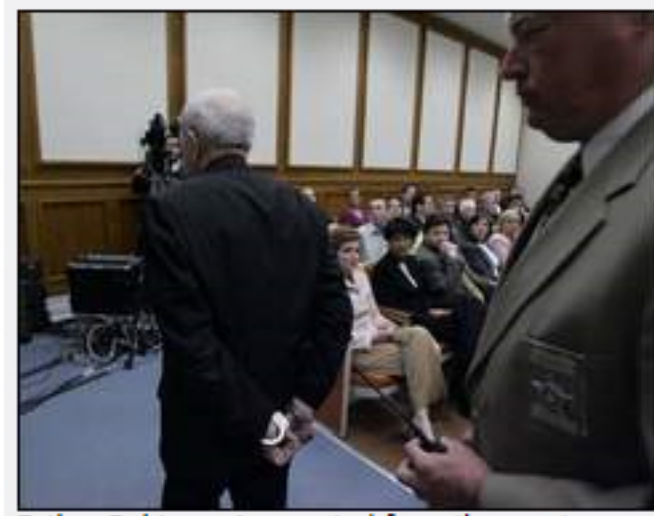
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Robinson, who is retired from the Toledo diocese and barred from public ministry, was taken down an elevator to a basement tunnel leading to the Lucas County jail.

After he was booked, the priest exchanged his black clerical garb for a brown jail jumpsuit — he was not allowed to keep his rosary — and was held overnight in the jail's second-floor medical unit.

He is under a suicide watch for the next few days as a precautionary measure, according to Jim O'Neal, corrections administrator.

Robinson will be taken within a few days to the Corrections Center of Northwest Ohio and then transferred to an as-yet undetermined facility.



Father Robinson is escorted from the courtroom by security officer Bob Dietrich after sentencing by Judge Thomas Oswik. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

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We didn't go back in the office and high-five each other."

Robinson is believed to be the first U.S. Roman Catholic priest ever tried and convicted for murder in the death of a Roman Catholic nun, and the ritualistic aspects of the slaying made the case even more unusual.

"It is unlikely that the factual situation ... will ever be repeated," Mr. Mandros said.

Sister Margaret Ann, a nurse and former administrator of two different Sisters of Mercy hospitals, was choked and stabbed 31 times on the morning of April 5, 1980 — the day before Easter and her 72nd birthday.

The nun, who lived in a convent in Mercy Hospital, slept later than her usual 5 a.m. wake-up that day because there was no 6 a.m. Mass in the chapel on Holy Saturday.

Described as a devout, "old-school" Catholic, Sister Margaret Ann ate a quick breakfast of grapefruit, cereal, and coffee before heading to the sacristy, next door to the chapel, where she planned to make preparations for the evening services.

There the nun, who was hard of hearing, was attacked from behind. The killer wrapped a piece of cloth around her neck and choked her so tightly that he broke two bones in her neck.

Barely alive, Sister Margaret Ann was placed on the cold terrazzo floor and covered with an altar cloth.

SISTER MARGARET ANN PAHL
 Sister Mary Annunciata (name change Sept. 1968)
Born: Edgerton, Ohio, April 6, 1908
Entered Sisters of Mercy: Sept. 24, 1927
1927 - 1933 - Novitiate and Student Nurse, St. Rita, Lima, Ohio
1933 - 1936 - Floor Supervisor, St. Rita, Lima
1936 - 1936 - Assistant Superintendent of Nurses, Mercy Hospital, Toledo
1936 - 1937 - Science Teacher, Our Lady of Mercy High School, Cincinnati
1937 - 1939 - Superintendent of Nurses, Mercy Hospital, Toledo
1939 - 1940 - Superintendent of Nurses, St. Lawrence Hospital, Lansing
1940 - 1942 - Superintendent of Nurses, St. Rita Hospital, Lima
1942 - 1947 - Floor Supervisor, Mercy Hospital, Tiffin
1947 - 1948 - Floor Supervisor, Mercy Hospital, Toledo
1948 - 1954 - Supervisor, Administrator, Mercy Hospital, Tiffin
1954 - 1959 - 1st Counselor, Floor Supervisor, St. Charles Hospital, Toledo
1959 - 1962 - Superior, Administrator, St. Charles Hospital, Toledo
1962 - 1966 - Associate Director of Nursing Service, Mercy Hospital, Toledo
1966 - 1967 - Supervisor Medical and Surgical Nursing, St. Rita Hospital, Lima
1967 - 1968 - 2nd Counselor, Supervisor Medical and Surgical Nursing, St. Rita Hospital, Lima
1968 - 1969 - Counselor, Director of Patient Relations, St. Rita Hospital, Lima
1969 - 1971 - Obstetrics Supervisor, Our Lady of Mercy Hospital, Colovater, Ohio
1971 - 1980 - Pastoral Care Department, Sacristy Work, Mercy Hospital, Toledo

SOURCE: Sisters of Mercy THE BLADE

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correct decision," she said.

Friends and relatives of Robinson declined to comment. As she exited the courtroom, Robinson's sister-in-law, wiping away tears, turned to Claudia Vercellotti, local co-coordinator of an advocacy group for victims of clerical abuse, and said, "I hope you rot in hell."

In a press conference, prosecutors said they were surprised by the quick verdict.

"My keen analysis of the situation is that either we had presented a very overwhelming case, or a very underwhelming case," Mr. Mandros said.

Defense attorneys Alan Konop, John Thebes, and Nicole Khoury looked tired and dejected when they met with the media.

"Obviously, we are extremely disappointed with the outcome," Mr. Thebes said, tears welling in his eyes. "Today is difficult. But the jury has spoken and unfortunately that's the way it is."

Mr. Konop cut short questions about what the defense might have done differently.

"I'm not going to talk about second guessing, what should and what should not have been done," he said. "What was done was done. The verdict was rendered. We respect the verdict, and there will be an appeal and we do think there are some appealable issues."

All 12 jurors opted to skip the press conference. One, Trushay Carpenter, told WTOL-TV yesterday that most jurors initially believed Robinson was guilty and the rest were persuaded during deliberations of the evidence.

She said the prosecution's case about the murder weapon is what convinced her that Robinson was guilty, and that she felt the defense's case was not very strong.

Contacted by The Blade last night, juror Denise West said: "It was a very, very difficult case, and I just want to put it behind me." She declined further comment.

Four other jurors contacted by The Blade last night declined to comment about the trial, and the others could not be reached for comment.

Bishop Leonard Blair, who placed Robinson on leave after his arrest April 23, 2004, said in a statement that it was "a sad day for the diocese of Toledo."

Blade Staff Writers Ignazio Messina, Christina Hall, and Megan Gilbert contributed to this report.

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