

**MURDER CASE STUDY**

**VICTIM**

**REV. MICHAEL MACK**

**MURDERER**

**STEVEN A. DEGRAFF**

**DATE OF MURDER: DECEMBER 7, 2001**



**CROSSLAND  
FOUNDATION**

**Leon J. Podles**

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Father Michael B. Mack, a native of Madison, Wisconsin, had the misfortune not only to be murdered, but to be murdered in a place that connected his death with the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church and that put an undeserved shadow on his reputation.

Mack was ordained as a Dominican in 1969<sup>1</sup> and served as a Newman Center chaplain at the University of Arizona in Tucson until 1975.<sup>2</sup> He later (1996-2001) was the director of the Catholic Foundation,<sup>3</sup> which raised money for the diocese of Gallup, New Mexico, the poorest diocese in the United States. He also was an assistant parish priest in Winslow, Arizona.

Like many priests and like many men, Mack struggled with alcoholism.<sup>4</sup> He sought treatment at Jemez Springs, a treatment center in the mountains of north-central New Mexico run by the Servants of the Paraclete.

The Servants of the Paraclete<sup>5</sup> were founded by Father Gerald Fitzgerald precisely to help priests with alcohol and drug problems. Unfortunately, bishops began sending Fitzgerald sexual abusers, who was at a loss what to do with them. He thought they should not be priests and could not understand the tolerance that the bishops and the Vatican extended to the molesters, whom he called Judases and rattlesnakes. The bishop of Santa Fe removed Fitzgerald from the order he had founded, and the Servants of the Paraclete developed notoriety for treating abusers and sending them into parishes, where they abused again.

In addition to treating these abusers, the Paracletes continued to treat priests with less disreputable problems, and Father Mack was one of them. He later joined the Servants of the Paraclete. Like many recovering alcoholics, Mack became an alcoholism counselor so that he could help others conquer the demons that once had afflicted him. As the director of counseling at Jemez Springs later said, Mack “was always working with the underdogs, the misunderstood and the oppressed.”<sup>6</sup> Mack’s bishop said that Mack “had experienced a lot of difficulty as a young man and as a priest, and he was willing to share his story with people.”<sup>7</sup> Mack finished up his work as an assistant pastor in Winslow, Arizona in the late fall of 2001.<sup>8</sup> At fifty-nine, he decided to take a year off for reflection and study, and on December 2, 2001, moved into a cottage on the grounds of the Jemez Springs center. He would have been sixty years old on December 21, 2001.

Steven A. Degraff, thirty-three years old, one of society’s underdogs, had been in prison for burglary and assault in California, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and New York.<sup>9</sup> He moved into the Jemez Springs area at the beginning of 2001 and worked as a short order cook in nearby La

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<sup>1</sup> “Michael Mack to be Ordained,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 17, 1969, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> “New Chaplains Arrive at U[niversity] of A[rizona] Catholic Center,” *Tucson Daily Citizen*, October 10, 1970, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Logan and Katie Burford, “Slain Priest Was Popular in Diocese,” *Albuquerque Journal*, December 11, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Logan and Katie Burford, “Slain Priest Was Popular in Diocese,” *Albuquerque Journal*, December 11, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> See Leon J. Podles, *Sacrilege: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church* (Baltimore: Crossland Press, 2008) pp. 308-311.

<sup>6</sup> Heather Clark, “Man Arrested in Priest’s Killing,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, January 4, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Katie Burford and Paul Logan, “Slain Priest Was Popular in Diocese,” *Albuquerque Journal*, December 11, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> “Popular Priest Mack, City Native, Murdered,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, December 12, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Rick A. Maesa, “Priest Lovingly Remembered, But Suspect Remains a Mystery,” *Albuquerque Tribune*, January 4, 2002.

Cueva. A police deputy frequently saw him sitting on a guard rail on New Mexico Route 4, less than a mile from Mack's house. On December 7, 2001, Mack returned home from dinner and discovered Degraff burglarizing his house. Degraff hit Mack with a hammer and a lead crystal glass and stabbed him in the neck with a kitchen knife.<sup>10</sup> He then stole Mack's wallet, keys, and car.

Degraff continued his criminal career. Soon after, he was picked up by the Pojoaque Tribal Police on drug and auto theft charges. On December 28, he was transferred to the Sandoval County Jail on yet another stolen car charge. There he confessed to police that he killed Mack and told them how to find the ravine where he had abandoned Mack's car.<sup>11</sup> Degraff, knowing about the reputation of the Jemez Springs center, claimed that fifty-nine-year-old Mack "tried to rape him"<sup>12</sup> when Degraff broke into the house and pled innocent to murder charges. The prosecutor pointed out the improbability of this story.<sup>13</sup> In March 2003 Degraff was convicted of first-degree murder<sup>14</sup> and in August 2003 sentenced to 46 \_ years in prison.<sup>15</sup> His conviction was appealed and affirmed.<sup>16</sup>

Cindy Sherrett, Mack's niece, came to New Mexico for the trial. After Degraff was convicted, she said,

In the last year I've been through so much sorrow and grief. At the anniversary in December, I was feeling so much anger, I didn't know what to do with the anger. Now I fell like well, I don't hate. The fact that (Degraff) wasn't able to show any remorse or sorrow during the trial shows something about him is so broken. This now gives us a chance to start healing.<sup>17</sup>

In 1972, when he was a Newman Chaplain, Mack participated in a seminar on death and dying. He conveyed his experience in comforting the dying: he would tell them,

After a day of hard work, it is good to sleep. After a lifetime of fulfillment, it is good to rest.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Chris Vogel, "Jurors Hear Police Tape of Suspect," *Albuquerque Journal*, March 20, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Katie Burford, "Police Arrest Drifter in Priest's Death," *Albuquerque Journal*, January 4, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Perea, "Priest's Death Brings Up Memories of Prior Scandal," *Marysville Journal-Tribune*, March 7, 2002, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Chris Vogel, "Prosecutor Dismisses Claim of Abuse," *Albuquerque Journal*, March 18, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Chris Vogel, "Man Guilty of Murder in Priest's Slaying," *Albuquerque Journal*, March 22, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Carlson, "Priest Killer Gets 46 \_ Years," *Albuquerque Journal*, August 19, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> *State of New Mexico v. Steven DeGraff*, Supreme Court of the State of New Mexico, 2006-NMSC-011.

<sup>17</sup> Chris Vogel, "Suspect Guilty in Priest Slaying," *Albuquerque Journal*, March 22, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Kuehlthau, "'Death a Forbidden Subject, But Face It,' Workshop Told," *Tucson Daily Citizen*, February 11, 1972, p. 45.