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Fire Victim Believed to Be Priest

By John McDonald
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Firefighters forced their way into a Hampton Bays house they found fully engulfed in flames Sunday night, but their efforts came too late to rescue the dwelling's sole occupant, tentatively identified as a well-known retired Catholic priest.

"A hose team aggressively attacked through the flames into the front door, in an effort to save the sole occupant," said a spokesman for Hampton Bays Fire Chief Allan Geyer. The victim, who officials believe was the retired Rev. William M. Burke, 73, was already dead when firefighters reached him in the Linda Lane house, fire and police officials said.

"He was a good friend and a good priest," said Bishop Alfred J. Markiewicz, now the bishop of Kalamazoo, Mich. For about five years, the two worked together at St. Andrew Roman Catholic Church in Sag Harbor. "I just spoke to him last week by phone, he had some health problems and was going to see the doctor," the bishop said.

Det. Sgt. Robert Flood of the Southampton Town police said that the origin of the fire is not suspicious but is under investigation by the Suffolk Arson Squad because it involved a death. He added that dental records are being reviewed by the Suffolk Medical Examiner before a positive identification is made.

Burke, who was ordained in 1946 and had worked in several parishes in Nassau and Queens, had retired in 1988 due to health problems. Bishop James Daly, auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, said that Burke had been receiving a stipend from the church and has been assisting priests in parishes near his home, as his health permitted.

"We went to the seminary in Huntington at the same time, and I've known him well over the years," said Bishop Daly. "I regret this so much, it's such a sad death. He was a pleasant and happy young man, eager to serve the church."

Rev. John J. Corcoran, pastor of St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church in Center Moriches, said that Burke had worked at his parish just before retiring. Father Burke, he said, was active in all aspects of the parish but was especially fond of working with couples about to be married.

Bishop Markiewicz said Burke's specialty "was working with people one-on-one. He loved people." The bishop added that like people of all stations, Burke had faced problems in his own life and worked to overcome them and help others with similar problems. "He studied in Michigan how to help his brother alcoholics. That was how he was able to work at the guesthouse in Sag Harbor and assist in the retreats there." Even after retiring, the bishop said, Burke worked as a volunteer for Alcoholics Anonymous.

The Rev. Edmund Mankowski, who had known Burke since the two attended St. John's University together in the 1940s, said, "He was a great guy and a brilliant man. He was a good preacher."

On Linda Lane, where Burke had lived alone in recent years, neighbors knew him as somebody who kept to himself. "He was a very nice man, he was very quiet," said William Bitz, who had known him since 1976. Others in the community knew him for his guest sermons at nearby St. Rosalie's Roman

Catholic Church. "He was a nice man, and I enjoyed his sermons," Diane Evans said. "I always ended up crying and laughing, I felt it was for me."

Funeral arrangements were incomplete.

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