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2 Jesuit Priests Beaten to Death

30 October 2008 By Anna Malpas / Staff Writer Two Jesuit priests were found beaten to death in an apartment just meters away from Moscow police headquarters, investigators said Wednesday.

Otto Messmer, 47, a Russian citizen and top Jesuit figure in Russia, and Victor Betancourt, a 42-year-old Ecuadorian citizen, were found dead with battered skulls at 10 p.m. Tuesday in an apartment at 19 Ulitsa Petrovka, investigators and Catholic officials said. Police headquarters is located at 38 Ulitsa Petrovka.

"They didn't answer phone calls, so their fellow brothers in the order went to the apartment, where they found them dead," said Igor Kovalevsky, general secretary of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Russia, RIA-Novosti reported.

The priests were believed to have been dead for about 24 hours before they were found, the Investigative Committee said in a statement.

Investigators are exploring all possible motives for the killings, including the possibility of a quarrel, since "there were traces of a party in the room," the statement said.

Investigator Yury Sukharev told Gazeta.ru that there were glasses and open bottles of wine and absinthe in the kitchen.

The door of the apartment was open when the bodies were found, but it was unclear whether any valuables had been stolen. The five-room apartment belongs to the Jesuits, the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Russia said.

A spokeswoman for the prosecutor's office said she could give no more information than was in the Investigative Committee's statement.



Alexander Natruskin / Reuters
The 19 Ulitsa Petrovka building where the bodies of two priests were found.



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Betancourt
statement said.

Messmer, whose title was Superior of the Russian Independent Region of the Society of Jesus, was born to an ethnic German family in Kazakhstan that kept its Catholic faith alive despite Soviet repression, the statement said. His brother, Bishop Nikolaus Messmer, is the Apostolic Administrator of Kyrgyzstan.

Betancourt had been working in Russia since 2001. This year, he began working at the St. Thomas Institute of Philosophy, Theology and History, a private Jesuit institution in Moscow.

The Jesuits have been active in Russia since 1992, when the the Russian Independent Region of the Society of Jesus was officially registered.

A requiem mass for the two priests was to be held at the Immaculate Conception Cathedral on Wednesday evening.

Early media reports said police were called to the apartment after a fight and that they were looking for a Latin American man who had fled the scene.

A police spokesman could not confirm the reports Wednesday.

The Catholic Church expressed hope that the perpetrators would be brought to justice. "The church hopes that the Russian law enforcement organs will be able to find the criminals and the court and society will give an objective legal and moral judgment of their misdeeds," the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Russia said in the statement.

Both men carried out pastoral work at the St. Louis Catholic Church on Ulitsa Malaya Lubyanka, the



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Messner

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