

# Priest in fraud case gets suspended term & must repay \$1.5M

By DAVID ARMSTRONG

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A Marshfield priest and former Massachusetts human service vendor was sentenced to a suspended jail term yesterday and ordered to repay \$1.5 million for his role in an Ohio fraud case.

Rev. Charles Virga, an Episcopal priest, was sentenced after an unusual day-long hearing that featured testimony from high-ranking church officials from Massachusetts and Michigan.

"This is a difficult case to issue a decision in," Common Pleas Judge Guy Reece said. "It is easy to say the person should be on probation or incarcerated."

Reece sentenced Virga to a 12-to-18-month jail term, but suspended the sentence so the priest will not spend any time in jail. Virga also was placed on probation for five years.

Virga, who wore a black shirt with white collar during the hearing, told the judge the Ohio case was the result of his being an incompetent businessman.

"I'm not an angel," he said, "but I didn't take any money... I didn't gain personally."

Virga was sentenced after pleading no contest to one count of theft and 10 counts of deception relating to his operation of group homes for the mentally retarded in Ohio.

An investigator for the Ohio attorney general said Virga bilked the state out of \$1.7 million in the mid-1980s.

The judge's sentence came after emotional pleas from church officials to spare the

priest from jail time.

William Hahn, the senior layperson at the Trinity Episcopal Church in Marshfield, said Virga had turned around the financially and spiritually ailing congregation at the church.

"It is confusing for me to hear these allegations," said Hahn. "If you were in my position you would understand you are not talking about Father Virga."

Virga was assigned to the church last year after he was ordained in Michigan.

The bishop of the Michigan diocese, the Rev. Stuart Wood, said he ordained Virga because the bishop of the Massachusetts diocese refused to do so.

Wood said Bishop David Johnson would not ordain Virga because of the charges in Ohio.

Wood said Virga has been a productive and effective priest since joining the church.

The testimony of church officials, however, flew in the face of statements by prosecutors and investigators. In a probation report filed with the judge, one investigator said Virga "should hang" for his crimes.

The government said Virga bilked the state, contractors and his employees.

As part of his sentence, the judge banned Virga from future health care businesses in Ohio and ordered him to cooperate with investigators probing human service fraud nationally.

Virga ran businesses that operated group homes for the mentally retarded in several states in the 1980s.

Virga was banned by a Superior Court order in 1990 from operating health care businesses in Massachusetts.



Herald photo by Michael A. Layhe

**TURNOVER:** A van rests on its roof yesterday after it overturned on Route 1 near the Revere-Malden line in an early-morning mishap.

## Van flips in highway accident

A van driven by a Chelsea man overturned yesterday morning in the northbound lane of Route 1, near the Revere-Malden line.

State Police in Peabody said the van was driven by Thanh Van Nguyen of Blossom Street. There were no charges filed against Nguyen by State Trooper Kevin Condon.

It was not known if Nguyen was hurt or if another vehicle was involved, as the police report was incomplete.

The crash occurred at 6:15 near Kappy's Liquor Mart and the Shell gas station, police said.

Traffic was tied up for several minutes while police worked to clear the wreckage.

# UFO doc's not alien to Cuomo

## INSIDE TRACK

GAYLE FEE / LAURA RAPOSA

Everyone assumes there's *something* in New York Gov. Mario Cuomo's background that makes him take himself out of the presidential — and just recently — Supreme Court sweepstakes.

Could it be that Mario's had an extraterrestrial experience? Maybe he's even been **KIDNAPPED BY SPACE ALIENS!!!**

Why *else* would the gov's press secretary have called **The Cambridge Hospital** the other day looking to dig up information on Dr. **John E. Mack**, the hospital psychiatrist whose studies caused



MACK

the medical community to take a second look at the **UFO abduction theory?** Cuomo's press guy **David Egner** wanted to know if Mack *truly* exists and, if so, could the hospital throw together an info packet on the good doctor for the governor's bedtime reading.

You know — press clips, medical papers, current photo, (psychiatric evaluation?) — the works.

However, Egner refused to tell the hospital why the gov was making the request.

"It's confidential," he said. (Not anymore!)

Cuomo spokesgal **Ann Crowley** told the **Track Egner** was helping the governor answer a constituent's letter about the **UFO abduction theory**.

So, what's so *confidential* about that?

Move over, **Jerry Brown!** Looks like we've got a new **Gov. Moonbeam!**

### BIDDING A SAD CHEERI-O

Nearly five hours after they began, director **James Burrows** called the final "Cut" and it was tears-in-their-beers time for the cast and crew of "Cheers," which wrapped up production forever this week.

The episode, filmed Wednesday night for broadcast April 29, took much longer than usual, apparently because everyone dreaded last call.

"It started a little late — around 7:30 p.m. — and went beyond midnight because the director wanted to get the show perfect... and no one wanted it to end," said **Someone Who Was There**.

But when the end finally



CASEY & TED



Things may be looking up for Gov. **Mario Cuomo**, center, amid rumors of a Supreme Court judgeship, but are his eyes on the skies due to a **UFO encounter?** Cuomo is seeking information about a well-known **UFO researcher**.

came, a live band struck up the "Cheers" theme and it was like high school graduation day — lots of crying, hugging, even yearbook signing and home movies!

(The show's producers printed up a "Cheersbook" filled



WENDT

with photos, letters, and special messages. **John Ratzenberger** (aka **Cliff Clavin**) recorded the whole sobfest with his 35mm camera.)

The Boston-based show's last live studio audience was an intimate group — just family, close friends and long-time associates including **Danson's wife, Casey**, and their two kids **Alexis** and **Kate**.

(There was no sign of his reputed girlfriend **Whoopi Goldberg**.)

Our spies also spotted **Kirstie Alley's** hubby actor **Parker Stevenson**; **Woody Harrelson's** S.O. **Laura** and their new baby girl, **Deni**; **George Wendt's** brood; **Rhea Perlman's** sister **Heidi** was there (she wrote the episode) and their dad, **Phillip**, who plays "Cheers" regular, **Phil**.

Also present were **Kelsey Grammer's** wife **Leigh-Anne Cusshany**; former **NBC** chief **Brandon Tartikoff**; cartoonist **Garry Trudeau** (both men play barflies in the episode); and from **Boston**, **Bull & Finch Pub** owner **Tom Kershaw** and his mom, **Florence**; and production guy **Bill Aydelott** and his wife, **Nancy**.

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Other barroom blather:

● **Harrelson** got the **Biggest Crybaby** award for the night.

(Maybe he'd just seen the savage reviews of his new movie "Indecent Proposal.")

● The last scene of the "last call" episode, which will air May 20, also was filmed during the session.

We guess **James Burrows** wanted that "final" feel for the scene where — we believe — the barflies light up cigars and say good night.

● "Wings" director **Andy Ackerman** will shoot **John Ratzenberger's** new sitcom for **Fox TV**. **Ratzenberger** will play a barber in a small town a la "Mayberry RFD's" **Floyd**.

● Other "Cliff" news: **Ratzenberger** says he will *not* come to **Boston** on **May 20**. He'll be in **New Zealand**.

● **President Clinton** has not shot his big scene for the "Cheers" finale, but we hear it could still happen.

After the sobbing subsided, everyone went home to get a good night's sleep for last night's celebrity-studded rap party at the **Santa Monica Museum of Flying**.

Stay tuned for those details!



KIRSTIE & PARKER