

**MURDER CASE STUDY**

**VICTIM**



**IRENE GARZA**

**MURDERER**



**SUSPECT:  
REV. JOHN B. FEIT**

**DATE OF MURDER: HOLY SATURDAY, APRIL 16, 1960**



**CROSSLAND  
FOUNDATION**

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John B. Feit, a native of Chicago, had an uncle, also named John, who was a priest in Detroit.<sup>1</sup> His parents sent John to a seminary in San Antonio when he was thirteen; he studied for the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and was ordained on September 8, 1958. He is a published poet. He was attending a pastoral school of the Missionary Oblates at San Juan, Texas, in 1960. In nearby Edinburg, Texas, Feit often helped out at Sacred Heart Church where Rev. Charles Moran was the pastor.

### ***Maria America Guerra***

At 4:30 P.M., on March 23, 1960, Maria America Guerra, age 20, just back from nearby Pan American College, was at her home across the street from Sacred Heart Church in Edinburg. She went to the outside bathhouse to get cleaned up and noticed a man observing her. He had black hair and horned-rimmed glasses and sat in a blue-and-white 1956 or 1957 car.<sup>2</sup>

After dinner, Guerra crossed the street. The car was still there. She entered the church and saw the same man sitting in the back; he was wearing black pants and a tan t-shirt. She knelt at the altar rail and was saying her rosary when he looked around the church and walked toward her. She said

“The next thing I know, he had turned very quick, come to my rear and grabbed me around the head.

He placed a small cloth over my mouth, and I fell backward to the floor. I began to scream now as when I fell, the rag fell free from my mouth. Then while I was on the floor, he tried to cover my mouth with his hands to stop me from screaming and when he did this, one of his fingers went into my mouth and I bit hard. I know I bit very hard because I could taste blood in my mouth.

When I bit him, he threw me toward the south door of the church and ran out the north side door.”<sup>3</sup>

Maria Christina Tijerna was walking past this church at 6:20 P.M. She heard screams and saw a man hurry from the church clutching a white towel and enter the church sacristy.<sup>4</sup> Tijerina saw Guerra run out of church and knock on the rectory door. After Moran’s voice from inside said “Wait a minute,” Tijerina asked Guerra what had happened. Guerra went home and reported the incident to the police that night.<sup>5</sup>

Feit later said that he had visited Sacred Heart that day, and had been in the church praying until 5:15 P.M., when he left to discuss with Moran the personal problems of a boy he knew. He returned to his blue-and-white 1956 Ford Tudor and went back to San Juan in time to ring the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Nelson, “Altar Ego,” *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Nelson, “Altar Ego,” *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Nelson, “Altar Ego,” *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> “Priest’s Trial Ends on Deadlocked Jury,” *Amarillo Globe-Times*, September 15, 1961.

<sup>5</sup> “Alleged Victim Leads Off Case Against Priest,” *Big Spring [Texas] Daily Herald*, September 12, 1961, p. 1.

bell at 5:30 P.M. But witnesses in San Juan said he had not rung the bell.<sup>6</sup> Moran remembered that Feit was wearing horn-rimmed glasses, a tan shirt, and black pants that day, but had no memory of a discussion about a boy.<sup>7</sup>

For several days people noticed that Feit had a mangled finger. He claimed he had hurt it on the mimeograph machine, and on the day before the attack had asked a priest and a secretary for alcohol and a bandage. They said he had asked for help caring for his finger after the attack, and that he could not have mangled his finger in the mimeograph machine.<sup>8</sup> One secretary, Clothilde (Tilly) Sanchez, noticed teeth marks.<sup>9</sup> She could also recognize Feit's distinctive voice on the phone. After the murder of Irene Garza and after she had spoken to the police, Sanchez got a call and a voice she was sure was Feit's said, "You're next, Tilly."<sup>10</sup>

In early May 1960, the police asked Guerra and Tijerna to view a lineup; they went to the police station and both identified Feit as the man at the church.<sup>11</sup> Soon after that she saw him in the library of the Pan American College, but he was dressed as a priest.<sup>12</sup>

The pastor of Sacred Heart, O'Brien, waited many years to tell police all that he knew about John Feit.

### ***Irene Garza***

Three weeks after the attack on Guerra in Edinburg, another crime was committed eight miles away in McAllen, Texas, where Nick and Josephina Garza operated a dry cleaning shop.

Their daughter, Irene Garza, was born in 1934. She was thin and pretty, and had been a drum majorette in McAllen High School. She was the first person in her family to go to college and to graduate school. She was Pan American College Queen and Miss All South Texas in 1958. She was active in the Legion of Mary. She taught second grade in a poor school and spent her first paycheck as a teacher for clothes and books for the students who could not afford them.<sup>13</sup> She began dating one young man whom she liked. She described him as "this Anglo boy – not real handsome, but cute and religious (which is important). He is a member of the Legion of Mary and goes to Mass and receives Communion every morning."<sup>14</sup> She wanted a good Catholic husband and a big family.

In the spring of 1960 she wrote to a friend: "Remember the last time we talked? I told you I was afraid of death. Well, I am cured. I no longer fear death. I have been going to mass and

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<sup>6</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, "Assault Victim, Murdered Women Shared Similar Spring," *Brownsville Herald*, March 23, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, "Assault Victim, Murdered Women Shared Similar Spring," *Brownsville Herald*, March 23, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Pamela Coloff, "Unholy Act," *Texas Monthly*, April 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

communion every day and you can't imagine the courage, the faith and happiness it has given me.”<sup>15</sup>

Three parish priests and a visiting priest, John Feit, were hearing confessions at Sacred Heart Church in McAllen on a busy Holy Saturday, April 16, 1960, from 3 to 6 P.M. and again starting at 7 P.M. At 5 P.M. a teenager, Hortensia Gonzalez, went to confession at Sacred Heart to Feit. After the confession he told her, “I need to talk to you after confession, so wait for me.” She was disturbed by this request, so she ran home.<sup>16</sup>

On this Holy Saturday Irene Garza called her best friend, Maria Alicia Sotelo, about going to a movie but said he wanted to go to confession first. She called Father Richard Junius at Sacred Heart about hearing her confession (and possibly about an Easter egg hunt she was arranging at the church) just before 7 P.M. Feit answered and said Junius was already in church hearing confessions. Garza drove a dozen blocks from her family home to Sacred Heart Church and went to confession to Feit – but not in the church. People saw her walking into the church at 7 P.M.; three priests, but not Feit, returned at 7 P.M. Witnesses saw Garza walking to the rectory. Feit said he heard her confession and then left the rectory with her about 7:30 P.M. But no one saw her leave the rectory.<sup>17</sup>

At 1 A.M. Easter morning while drinking coffee with the other priests after the Easter Vigil, Feit mentioned the odd incident of the young woman who had wanted to go to confession in the rectory. He told the other priests that he had instructed her to go to confession in the church.<sup>18</sup>

When Irene Garza hadn't returned home by midnight, her parents began to worry. At 2:30 A.M. they began a search. They found her car two blocks from the church.

Feit made several trips in the parish car on Easter. The pastor, Rev. Joseph O'Brien, suspicious because of the news that Irene Garza was missing and because of the scratches on Feit's hands, tried to follow Feit on Easter night, but lost him in traffic.<sup>19</sup> O'Brien searched the basement and attic of the rectory and found nothing.<sup>20</sup>

Three days later a pedestrian found her high-heeled shoe, her purse, and her mantilla on a farm road.

On Thursday after Easter, April 21, 1960, her body was found floating in a canal.<sup>21</sup> Sometime after 7:30 P.M. on Holy Saturday someone bludgeoned her, raped her while she was in a coma, and then suffocated her and threw her body into a canal on Easter Sunday. Her body was identified by two priests from Sacred Heart church.<sup>22</sup> The autopsy said “evidence of

<sup>15</sup> “Footprints Offer Hope in Slaying,” *Corpus Christi Times*, April 23, 1960.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Nelson, “Altar Ego,” *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Brenda Rodriguez and Doug J. Swanson, “Ex-Priest Fights Suspicion Again in '60 Rape-Slaying,” *Dallas Morning News*, November 3, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, “Man Recalls Former Priest's Scratches after Murder,” *Brownsville Herald*, March 26, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, “Cover-up Alleged in Case Gone Cold,” *Brownsville Herald*, March 25, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Brooks Egerton, “DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest,” *Dallas Morning News*, November 20, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> “Teacher's Body Found in Canal in South Texas,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, April 21, 1960.

<sup>22</sup> Eleanor Mortensen, “Valley Girl Is Found Dead,” *Corpus Christi Times*, April 21, 1960.

strangulation could not be found, but suffocation could have been carried out by placing a cloth over the mouth and nose, especially if the subject was unconscious.”<sup>23</sup>

On the Friday after Easter the police came to tell the Garza family the news: Irene’s body had been found; she had been beaten and raped. Josephina collapsed and let loose a cry that no one ever forgot. Her niece described it: “They said it was this long awful moan from deep inside her body – almost like the howl of a wolf. They said it was like nothing they had ever heard or ever heard again.”<sup>24</sup>

When the police drained the canal in late April they found a portable photographic slide viewer a few feet from where Irene’s body had been found.<sup>25</sup> Possibly its cord had been tied around the body and used to weight the body to keep it from floating. The viewer belonged to Feit; he identified it as his.<sup>26</sup> The police received this note “This viewer belongs to John Feit (Order of Mary Immaculate,) of San Juan, Texas. It was purchased in Port Isabel, Texas, in July 1959 at Freddie’s Professional Pharmacy. Terms – cash. Price – I don’t remember. April 29, 1960.”<sup>27</sup> This information - that Feit’s slide viewer was found near Garza’s body - was not made public during the initial investigation of the murder. The police also found in the canal candlesticks that came from Sacred Heart Church. They made no effort to match them to the wounds on Garza’s head.<sup>28</sup>

On April 21, 1960 police learned of the criminal complaint about Feit in Edinburg. In Chicago, where he had been sent by his religious order, Feit was given four polygraph tests at John E. Reid and Associates by examiner George W. Lindberg, who later became a federal judge. Feit told Lindberg the contents of Garza’s confession.<sup>29</sup> Lindberg asked Feit to explain the scratches on his hands. Feit said that the confession had upset him so much that he was sweating profusely and needed to drive around to cool down. Since he had sweated so much, Feit needed to change clothes, so he drove to the San Juan center. It was locked, so he climbed up a tree to get in a second story window.<sup>30</sup> (Feit told a different story in May 1960 in his sworn statement.) Despite the McAllen’s Police Department’s claim that the tests were inconclusive, Lindberg’s report said that the tests “definitely implicated him [Feit] in both crimes.”<sup>31</sup> Feit denied committing the murder, but claimed that the real murderer had confessed to him.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Brenda Rodriguez and Doug J. Swanson, “Ex-Priest Fights Suspicion Again in ’60 Rape-Slaying,” *Dallas Morning News*, November 3, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Nelson, “Altar Ego,” *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> “Search Centering on Canal Section,” *The Brownsville Herald*, April 28, 1960.

<sup>26</sup> Pamela Coloff, “Unholy Act,” *Texas Monthly*, April 2005. He never explained how his viewer had gotten into the canal near Garza’s body.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Nelson, “Altar Ego,” *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Nelson, “Altar Ego,” *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, “Priest’s Polygraph Disputed by Examiner,” *Brownsville Herald*, April 11, 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Brenda Rodriguez and Doug J. Swanson, “Ex-Priest Fights Suspicion Again in ’60 Rape-Slaying,” *Dallas Morning News*, January 19, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> In 2002 Lindberg, at that time a Federal judge, repeated: “I was satisfied that he [Feit] had, in my opinion, been untruthful in denying the relevant issue questions and that would involve the killing and attempted rape,” (Emma Perez-Trevio, “Priest’s Polygraph Disputed by Examiner,” *Brownsville Herald*, April 11, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> “Anatomy of a Murder Case,” *Dallas Morning News*, November 21, 2004.

The police asked Feit what had happened. He said that at 7 P.M. on Holy Saturday he and Father O'Brien were leaving the rectory when the phone rang. Feit answered it and asked to speak to Father Junius, who was hearing confession in the church. Feit told her that Junius was busy until 10:30 P.M., but he could talk to her if she could come immediately. Irene Garza arrived and discussed a personal problem and Feit then sent Garza to church to go to confession. He accompanied Garza when she left the rectory and he went to hear confessions.

At this point what Feit remembered and what others remembered diverged significantly.

At about 8:00 P. M. he got the rectory keys from Rev. O'Brien and went for a break. He said he returned to the church at 8:15 P.M. He began to get hoarse about 9 P.M. and returned to the rectory for a smoke and some soda. He again returned to the church to hear confessions. But the people in the church who were waiting to go to confession said that Feit's line stopped moving around 8 P.M. and after that there was a sign that there was no priest in the confessional. Feit said at about 9:50 P.M. he noticed that a screw had fallen out of his eyeglasses. He told Father Bursch that he would have to go to San Juan to get his other glasses. Feit said that when he arrived in San Juan, he discovered that the building was locked. He had to place a wooden barricade against a wall and climb in through a second story window. He scraped his hands while climbing the wall. He went back to McAllen and said the Easter Vigil mass with the other priests. After the mass O'Brien noticed that Feit had scratches on his hand.<sup>33</sup> On Easter day Feit went back and forth to the house in San Juan trying, he said, to get his glasses fixed.

After Easter, Feit was attending an audiovisual aid class at the University of Texas in Edinburg. Next to him sat Jose D. Garcia, who had just heard the news about the murder of Irene Garza. He noticed that Feit had obvious and fresh scratches on his hands. Garcia observed with great discomfiture that "they looked like fingernail scratches."<sup>34</sup>

U.S. Border Patrol Agent Harry Cecil questioned Feit about the murder for twelve hours. Feit told Cecil, "You will never convict me of anything."<sup>35</sup> Cecil also went to Sacred Heart Church to look at the parish car. It had just been washed inside and out because there was blood on the seat.<sup>36</sup> The McAllen chief of police Clint Mussey thought Feit was guilty but had been transferred out of town before the investigation was complete, stymieing the police. The lead investigator could not believe a priest had committed the murder.<sup>37</sup>

Immediately after the murder Feit was sent to study at Loyola University in Chicago. He claimed he suffered another nervous breakdown there when President Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963.<sup>38</sup>

The Hidalgo County Grand Jury on August 10, 1961, indicted Feit on charges of assault with attempt to rape in connection with the attack on Maria Guerra at Sacred Heart Church, Edinburg,

<sup>33</sup> Pamela Coloff, "Unholy Act," *Texas Monthly*, April 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, "Man Recalls Former Priest's Scratches after Murder," *Brownsville Herald*, March 26, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, "Cover-up Alleged in Case Gone Cold," *Brownsville Herald*, March 25, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, "Cover-up Alleged in Case Gone Cold," *Brownsville Herald*, March 25, 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Brenda Rodriguez and Doug J. Swanson, "Ex-Priest Fights Suspicion Again in '60 Rape-Slaying," *Dallas Morning News*, November 3, 2002.

<sup>38</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, "Former Priest Denies Link to Old Murder," *Brownsville Herald*, July 16, 2002.

on March 23, 1960. After he was indicted for attempted rape, Feit said he was not bitter, that priests must expect persecution: “Christ told the Apostles, ‘Know that of the world hates you, it also hated Me.’”<sup>39</sup> After disappearing for several weeks to an unspecified out of state hospital, he surrendered to police. Feit had the venue transferred to Austin and was tried on September 12, 1961. The jury deadlocked and the judge declared a mistrial.<sup>40</sup> In 1962 Feit pled no contest to a reduced charge of aggravated assault and was fined \$500. He was asked if he had anything to say and he replied, “Nothing.”<sup>41</sup> Later he claimed not to know what he had pleaded to in court.<sup>42</sup>

Irene Garza’s parents thought that the police were not doing a good job. They confronted both priests, Joseph O’Brien and Feit, and O’Brien assured them that if Feit had done anything wrong, the Church would punish him, and “church punishment was greater” than any sentence he would receive in court.<sup>43</sup> Feit then went to the Oblate’s headquarters in San Antonio, where he had important discussions with O’Brien, but the contents of these discussions would not be known to the police or the public until decades later. Feit also went to Trappist monasteries at New Melleray Abbey, Dubuque, Iowa, and at Assumption Abbey in Ava, Missouri; he again had significant discussions which would not be known to the police for decades.

Feit joined the Servants of the Paraclete in 1966 and rose to be a superior at the facility in Jemez Springs, New Mexico. There he supervised sexually abusive priests and decided when they would be placed back into contact with children. One of the most notorious abusers was James Porter, who had raped boys and girls in Massachusetts. In 1967 Porter arrived at Jemez Springs and was supervised by Feit. Feit sent Porter out into New Mexico parishes four times and each time Porter had to be returned to Jemez Springs because he had molested boys, mostly Hispanic boys seven to ten years old. Once Porter was caught sodomizing a boy in a body cast. Feit sent Porter to Houston where he also molested boys, and Feit lamented that Porter had “lapsed into his former failings.”<sup>44</sup> But Feit wrote to Porter’s home diocese that “there has been no occurrence of the problem that plagued Fr. Porter in the past.”<sup>45</sup> Rev. Peter Lechner, the current head of the Servants of the Paraclete said that he was shocked, absolutely shocked that a priest with a criminal background made decisions about priests accused of sexual misconduct.<sup>46</sup>

Rev. Joseph O’Brien in effect served as Feit’s probation officer, and was even named a “special investigator” by the city manager of McAllen. In December 1971 O’Brien sent the following note to the McAllen police:

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<sup>39</sup> “Charged Priest Says Not Bitter,” *Paris [Texas] News*, August 17, 1960, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> “Priest’s Trial Ends on Deadlocked Jury,” *Amarillo Globe-Times*, September 15, 1961.

<sup>41</sup> “Rev. Feit Fined \$500 in Rape Case,” *Corpus Christi Times*, March 28, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> “I was out of the loop,” Feit said. “I didn’t know that I would be convicted and found guilty on a plea of no contest. I didn’t know what that meant” (Emma Perez-Trevio, “Former Priest Denies Link to Old Murder,” *Brownsville Herald*, July 16, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> Brenda Rodriguez and Doug J. Swanson, “Ex-Priest Fights Suspicion Again in ’60 Rape-Slaying,” *Dallas Morning News*, November 3, 2002.

<sup>44</sup> Leon J. Podles, *Sacrilege: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church* (Baltimore: Crossland Press, 2008) pp. 118-119; Investigative Staff of the *Boston Globe*, *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church* (Boston: Little Brown and Company: 2002) pp. 43-45.

<sup>45</sup> Reese Dunklin, “Convicted Priest Helped Abusers Stay in Ministry,” *Dallas Morning News*, January 19, 2004.

<sup>46</sup> Reese Dunklin, “Convicted Priest Helped Abusers Stay in Ministry,” *Dallas Morning News*, July 13, 2002.

Dear Chief:

I have just received notice that John Feit left Denham Springs, New Mexico, and is now living in the Chicago area. He is seeking employment as a layman and will no longer function as a priest. This was his own decision and was not due to a problem.

If any further information is needed please feel free to call upon me.

Father Joseph O'Brien, OMI.<sup>47</sup>

After he left the priesthood, Feit in 1972 married an Hispanic woman he had met in New Mexico; they had three children. After several jobs in Chicago he moved to Phoenix and joined St. Theresa Church, where his brother, Matthias A. Feit, was pastor. As director of volunteers for the Society of Vincent de Paul in Phoenix, John Feit became a tireless advocate for the poor. He said of the homeless: "Many can't fend for themselves. Most are in pitiful shape. Hundreds need help, and few are getting it."<sup>48</sup> Under Feit's administration the Society moved into new Human Services Campus with a 300-person dining hall, and Feit respected the dignity of the poor: "We never serve soup because we don't want to be a soup kitchen."<sup>49</sup>

Nor was Feit's work for the poor confined to his twenty years of paid work. The director of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Phoenix said that "John often went beyond what anyone would remotely imagine a man doing. He truly lived his beliefs. And his passion motivated many others to do more than they otherwise would have done." When one of Feit's coworkers ran into financial difficulties, Feit asked that his salary be reduced and the money given to the coworker.<sup>50</sup> After retiring in 2002 he has continued to work for the poor and organized a JustFaith program to help Catholics put their faith into action in social matters.<sup>51</sup>

His reputation may explain why the *Arizona Republic* asked Feit to comment on the revelations about sexual abuse. In 2002, to calm the outrage at revelations of sexual abuse and cover-ups, the American bishops had decided that allegations of sexual abuse should be turned over to the civil authorities.

"It has to be that way," said John Feit, a father, grandfather and administrator for the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Phoenix. "It means that if someone is doing something wrong, they are above the law simply because they are an ordained minister."<sup>52</sup>

Feit's reputation as an advocate for the poor may also explain why the *Arizona Republic*, although it listed Feit's name among those priests and church employees accused of sexual

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>48</sup> William Hermann, "Phoenix Boom Left Indigents in the Dust," *Arizona Republic*, April 12, 2000.

<sup>49</sup> Sarah Anchors, (no title in archive) "Around Thanksgiving fifty years ago..." *Arizona Republic*, November 28, 2002.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Kelly Ettenborough and Nena Baker, "Ariz[ona] Catholics Welcome Church Officials' Efforts," *Arizona Republic*, April 25, 2002.



offenses,<sup>53</sup> has never printed a word about Feit's involvement in the Garza murder case. When asked by a reporter whether he was a danger to the community he said "Look at my record for the past 45 years."<sup>54</sup> It was 45 years since Irene Garza's murder.

### ***Investigation Reopened***

Rev. Joseph O'Brien OMI was pastor of Sacred Heart Church in McAllen in 1960; after Garza disappeared, he told police that he had seen scratches on Feit.<sup>55</sup> He kept pressuring Feit to admit what had happened, and finally at the Oblate's headquarters in San Antonio Feit admitted to the murder.<sup>56</sup> O'Brien did not go to the police at that time. He did not want to embarrass the Oblates and he feared that Feit would deny the admission and sue him for slander. But decades later O'Brien told both the police and Irene Garza's cousin, Noemi Ponce-Sigler, about how Feit had admitted to the murder.<sup>57</sup>

Dale Tacheny left the army in the late 1940s and joined the Trappists. He was known as Father Emmanuel; he was sent to Rome in 1958 to study and returned to the Abbey of our Lady of the Assumption in Ava, Missouri, as number two man and novice master. In 1963 the abbot called Tacheny with an unusual assignment. He told Tacheny that "there is a priest who murdered a woman who is in the guest house. He wants to become a monk. We are instructed to take him in."<sup>58</sup>

Feit told Tacheny that he was bothered and made anxious "by women with high heels who walked on hard floors."<sup>59</sup> (The shoe of Irene Garza's that was found by the side of the canal was high-heeled.<sup>60</sup>) Feit admitted to murder and expressed no remorse about it; he said "he had a sexual compulsion to attack women from behind"<sup>61</sup> especially "when he knelt behind them in church."<sup>62</sup> Tacheny asked why he wasn't in prison; Feit replied that "the Church is behind me"<sup>63</sup> because the hierarchy did not want the faithful to be scandalized by the knowledge that a priest was a murderer.

Feit told Tacheny that he heard Irene's confession in the rectory and then "subdued her and took part of her clothes off from the waist on up and then fondled her breasts."<sup>64</sup> He put her in the rectory basement and returned to church to hear confessions. He went back to the rectory and moved her to an apartment that he maintained. The next day, Easter, he put her in a bag in the

<sup>53</sup> Joseph A. Reaves, [no title in archives] "Bishop Thomas O'Brien (below) is prohibited...", *Arizona Republic*, November 10, 2002.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Brooks Egerton, "DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest," *Dallas Morning News*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>56</sup> Brooks Egerton, "DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest," *Dallas Morning News*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>59</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, "Confession to Murder: Former Monk, Priest Say They Know Who Killed Irene Garza," *Brownsville Herald*, March 23, 2005.

<sup>60</sup> Pamela Coloff, "Unholy Act," *Texas Monthly*, April 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Brooks Egerton, "DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest," *Dallas Morning News*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>62</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, "Confession to Murder: Former Monk, Priest Say They Know Who Killed Irene Garza," *Brownsville Herald*, March 23, 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Nelson, "Altar Ego," *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>64</sup> Anderson Cooper, "Justice on Trial: Keeping Them Honest," *360 Degrees*, June 8, 2007.

bathroom; as he left he heard her saying “I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.” When he returned later on Easter, she was dead.<sup>65</sup> He put her body in the car, “patting her on the breast,” telling her “everything will be OK.”<sup>66</sup>

Feit never named the victim, or where or when he committed the crime.<sup>67</sup> Because Feit came from San Antonio in 1963, Tacheny assumed that was the date and the locale of the crime.

Tacheny thought that women were safe as long as Feit was in the monastery, but when Feit decided he didn’t want to be a Trappist, Tacheny had to prepare him to deal with his compulsions. Tacheny had some training in psychology. Tacheny thought that he had been successful. To test this “he sent Feit on unsupervised visits to churches in Chicago and Missouri, telling him to kneel behind women to see if he felt the urge.”<sup>68</sup> Fortunately for these women, Feit no longer had these impulses; or at least that was what he told Tacheny, and that was the end of the matter. The Trappists could not keep Feit against his will, and the Oblates sent Feit to Jemez Springs, where he pursued his career.<sup>69</sup>

In April 2002 Tacheny, who had left the Trappists in 1967, was a tax accountant in Oklahoma City. He could not go to the grave taking the secret of the murder with him. He called the San Antonio police department and told Detective George Saidler about Feit. Saidler asked for the details in writing. Tacheny gave them, but Saidler could not match any details – a woman, in a church, at Easter – to a murder in San Antonio, and put the case aside. In November 2002 Rocky Millican from the Texas Ranger Cold Case Unit stopped by Saidler’s office to pick up some information about a case. They chatted, and Millikan said the unit was busy, and some of the cases were extremely old – why, one was from 1960: “A woman was murdered on Easter weekend, and the main suspect was a priest.”<sup>70</sup> Saidler felt the chill of coincidence that seemed much more than a coincidence. Saidler that night talked with Texas Ranger Rudy Jamarillo, who was handling the Garza case, and they agreed Tacheny’s case and Garza’s case were the same.

When an investigator called Feit in 2002 to tell him the murder investigation had been reopened, and was there anything that he could tell them as someone who had seen Irene Garza just before she was murdered. “That man doesn’t exist anymore,” Feit replied.<sup>71</sup>

### ***The Reluctant District Attorney***

René Guerra, District Attorney of Hidalgo County, Texas, decided that the Garza murder case was unsolvable and let everyone know his opinion: “Her killer got away. Where are you going to find the evidence? I reviewed the file some years back; there was nothing there. Can it be

<sup>65</sup> Brooks Egerton, “DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>66</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, “Cover-up Alleged in Case Gone Cold,” *Brownsville Herald*, March 25, 2005.

<sup>67</sup> AP, “’60 Slaying Under Probe,” *Tulsa World*, November 21, 2004.

<sup>68</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, “Confession to Murder: Former Monk, Priest Say They Know Who Killed Irene Garza,” *Brownsville Herald*, March 23, 2005.

<sup>69</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, “Confession to Murder: Former Monk, Priest Say They Know Who Killed Irene Garza,” *Brownsville Herald*, March 23, 2005.

<sup>70</sup> Pamela Coloff, “Unholy Act,” *Texas Monthly*, April 2005.

<sup>71</sup> Brooks Egerton, “DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest,” *Dallas Morning News*, November 20, 2004.

solved? Well, I guess if you believe pigs can fly, anything is possible. Why would anyone be haunted by her death? She died, her killer got away.”<sup>72</sup>

In October 2003 Guerra announced that he had reviewed the case and “refuse[d] to present the case to a grand jury” because of the lack of physical evidence linking Feit to the murder. When reminded that Feit’s slide viewer had been found adjacent to the body, Guerra replied, “Now, who put it there?”<sup>73</sup> Guerra blocked plans to arrest Feit and vowed to dismiss any case brought by the police. He claimed “you do know that in this case a lot of people have personal motivations. I know some people are writing books, they want to be in a cold case movie, or on TV, or write a book like John Grisham.”<sup>74</sup> Guerra wanted DNA evidence, or a confession, or a witness to the murder before he would send the case to the grand jury. Lynda de la Viña, a cousin of Irene Garza, reported that District Attorney Guerra had told her “Feit would never be indicted for Garza’s death.”<sup>75</sup>

After pressure from the Garza family who held a vigil in Irene’s memory across from the courthouse on November 1, 2003, the Day of the Dead,<sup>76</sup> Guerra in March 2004 sent the case to the grand jury. But the only person from Sacred Heart Church who was called to testify was Elena Sanchez, the church secretary, who had been a defense witness in Feit’s 1961 assault trial.<sup>77</sup> Other witnesses were heard only by tape recording.<sup>78</sup> Guerra fed the grand jury evidence every Wednesday for fifteen weeks and called police officers only in the eleventh week.<sup>79</sup> The grand jury decided not to indict Feit.<sup>80</sup> With that the police closed the case. Media organizations asked to see the investigative file: Guerra threatened to prosecute McAllen Police Chief Victor Rodriguez if he revealed the material, because, Guerra claimed, “there are some things that have to be kept secret that just cannot be put into print.”<sup>81</sup>

But these things were not kept secret.

The police reports found their way into the hands of the media<sup>82</sup>; reporters spoke to O’Brien and Tacheny, and Guerra had to explain his actions or failures to act.<sup>83</sup> Guerra said that he thought Tacheny and O’Brien were unreliable witnesses, although his office never sought to interview them. Guerra thought that O’Brien was an unreliable witness, “I felt Father O’Brien was in a

<sup>72</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, “District Attorney Inhibiting Police’s Desire to Pursue Murder Suspect,” *Brownsville Herald*, September 27, 2003.

<sup>73</sup> Anderson Cooper, “Justice on Trial: Keeping Them Honest,” *360 Degrees*, June 8, 2007.

<sup>74</sup> James Pinkerton, “After Forty-Three Years Torment of Slaying Still Lingers,” *Houston Chronicle*, December 7, 2003.

<sup>75</sup> Sarah Ovaska, “Garza Case Closed Without Indictment,” *McAllen Monitor*, June 10, 2004.

<sup>76</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, “Vigil Planned for Murder Victim,” *Brownsville Herald*, November 1, 2003.

<sup>77</sup> Sarah Ovaska, “Grand Jury Continues to Hear Evidence for Irene Garza Case,” *McAllen Monitor*, March 18, 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Anderson Cooper, “Justice on Trial: Keeping Them Honest,” *360 Degrees*, June 8, 2007.

<sup>79</sup> David J. Krajicek, “Killer Priest?” *New York Daily News*, April 24, 2005.

<sup>80</sup> Mariano Castillo, “Grand Jury Returns a No Bill in the Forty-Four-Year-Old Homicide Case,” *San Antonio Express-News*, June 10, 2004.

<sup>81</sup> “Media Seeks File on 1960 Texas Homicide,” APOnline, June 15, 2004.

<sup>82</sup> Brooks Egerton, “DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>83</sup> Brooks Egerton, “DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 20, 2004.

delicate state of mind and physical health.”<sup>84</sup> Guerra asked about O’Brien, “Is he in a condition to say anything, mental problems?” he said. O’Brien was of “questionable status” and had “a lot of problems.”<sup>85</sup> Guerra dismissed Tacheny because he had left the priesthood and might have “an ax to grind” with the church, and suspected him of hoping to make money by writing a book about the case.<sup>86</sup> Guerra claimed that the Texas Rangers suborned perjury from the witness: “I have proof in writing that the Ranger gave a witness all the information that he needed to testify in court on the person he suspected. The monk was not truthful when he said he knew about Irene Garza before he talked to law enforcement.”<sup>87</sup> When asked why Feit wasn’t called before the grand jury, Guerra replied, “If I make him a target, he’s got the right to tell me to go to hell.”<sup>88</sup>

After the grand jury failed to indict Feit, Tacheny came to Texas to visit Irene Garza’s grave and to apologize to her family for his part in the cover-up. He even stopped by to see Guerra and decided, “It’s a waiting game. When O’Brien and I are dead, that’s the end of it.”<sup>89</sup> O’Brien died in 2004. When asked why Tacheny accused him, Feit replied “I think he’s demented.”<sup>90</sup> When asked why O’Brien accused him, he replied in a Latin phrase that the reporters learned meant “say nothing bad about the dead” – *De mortuis nisi sed bonum*.

After a hotly contested election in 2006, in which he was severely criticized for his failure to prosecute John Feit, Rene Guerra was reelected and remains the District Attorney of Hidalgo County; and the Garza murder case will not be pursued any further. Irene Garza’s cousin, Noemi Ponce Sigler, sees Guerra as the main obstacle to the truth: “The plan of Rene Guerra is to bury the facts with Irene.”<sup>91</sup>

Police Chief Rodriguez said that Guerra’s conduct has been “completely contrary to the role of prosecutor” and completely inexplicable.<sup>92</sup> Juan Trevino of the McAllen cold case squad, when asked in 2007, “Who do you think committed the murder,” replied “John Feit.”<sup>93</sup>

### ***Forgive and Forget?***

The issues of justice and forgiveness were brought up by many of the participants in the case, and for some people a certain concept of Christian forgiveness seemed to obviate the demands of earthly justice.

Guerra said that “If John Feit did this I hope he will atone for his sin,” and as to Irene Garza, “I think that if she died leaving the church after confession, that she died in a state of grace and she

<sup>84</sup> Anderson Cooper, “Justice on Trial: Keeping Them Honest,” *360 Degrees*, June 8, 2007.

<sup>85</sup> Brooks Egerton, “DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>86</sup> Anderson Cooper, “Justice on Trial: Keeping Them Honest,” *360 Degrees*, June 8, 2007; Brooks Egerton, “DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>87</sup> “DA Campaign Battle Rages,” *McAllen Monitor*, April 8, 2006.

<sup>88</sup> Anderson Cooper, “Justice on Trial: Keeping Them Honest,” *360 Degrees*, June 8, 2007.

<sup>89</sup> Pamela Coloff, “Unholy Act,” *Texas Monthly*, April 2005.

<sup>90</sup> Gary Tuchman, “Retired Priest Questioned About 1960 Murder,” CNN, May 30, 2007.

<sup>91</sup> Brooks Egerton, “DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>92</sup> Brooks Egerton, “DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>93</sup> Anderson Cooper, “Justice on Trial: Keeping Them Honest,” *360 Degrees*, June 8, 2007.

should be in heaven, as I believe in God.”<sup>94</sup> Garza’s sister, Josie Cavazos, 2002 did not want the murder case pursued or the murderer brought to justice: “I feel like that’s between the person who murdered my sister and God. And if he’s asked God for forgiveness, he’s going to heaven just as much as anyone else, so what’s the point in all this... The Lord takes care of all these things.”<sup>95</sup> She added that “it was my parent’s wish as well as mine, that the person who did this ask for forgiveness because we don’t want him to be damned for eternity. We want him to go to heaven.”<sup>96</sup> The other members of Garza family said they had been criticized for pursuing justice for Irene and were told “if we were truly Christian, we should forgive and forget.”<sup>97</sup> Victims of sexual abuse by priests were frequently told the same thing; many Christians think that verse appears in the Bible.

Noemi Ponce Sigler said “Perhaps we’re all operating with different ideas of justice. All I know is that Irene was murdered, and that nobody has seen justice.”<sup>98</sup>

Irene Garza before her death had written to a friend, “I pray to God that I will love him as I should because many times I find myself wanting to rebel against Him, especially with all this sadness in the world. But I know I’m just a human and He’s so much smarter than I. Who am I to question His ways? God didn’t make things easy for us.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Brooks Egerton, “DA Refuses to Pursue Ex-Priest,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>95</sup> Brenda Rodriguez and Doug L. Swanson, “Ex-Priest Fights Suspicion Again in ‘60 Slaying,” *Dallas Morning News*, November 3, 2002.

<sup>96</sup> Emma Perez-Trevio, “Former Priest Denies Link to Old Murder,” *Brownsville Herald*, July 16, 2002.

<sup>97</sup> Sarah Ovaska, “Family Holds Memorial Service for Irene Garza,” *McAllen Monitor*, April 18, 2004.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Nelson, “Altar Ego,” *Phoenix New Times*, July 7, 2005.

<sup>99</sup> Emma-Perez-Trevio, “Forty-year-old murder, unsolved, unforgotten,” *Brownsville Herald*, July 22, 2002.