

# Amarillo youth, 17, arrested in rape-slaying of Catholic nun

## Sisters 'prayed for justice'

By DONNA WEEKS  
Amarillo News Staff Writer

Last night's announcement by Amarillo police that they believe they have captured the man who raped and strangled Sister Tadea Benz, brought new hope to the sisters of St. Francis Convent, who have prayed for justice, sanctity and peace from fear.

Sister Bernice Noggler, provincial superior to the convent sisters, said she thanked God when she heard that a suspect — 17-year-old Johnny Garrett, of north Amarillo, had been arrested in connection with the 76-year-old nun's death.

The arrest of a suspect came as an answer to fervent prayer, and reaction was swift from both the convent and Bishop L.T. Matthiesen, head of the Diocese of Amarillo.

Matthiesen last night said the sisters of St. Francis Convent have been living in constant fear since Sister Tadea's death on Halloween morning.

"I hope, as I said all the way through this, to make sure this doesn't happen again. If this is the right person, it may mean this (the end to fear for the nuns).

"The sisters have been living in fear ever since (Oct. 31). They have been receiving all kinds of offers of help. But I think just knowing that there was someone out there who could strike again, was hard to accept," said Matthiesen.

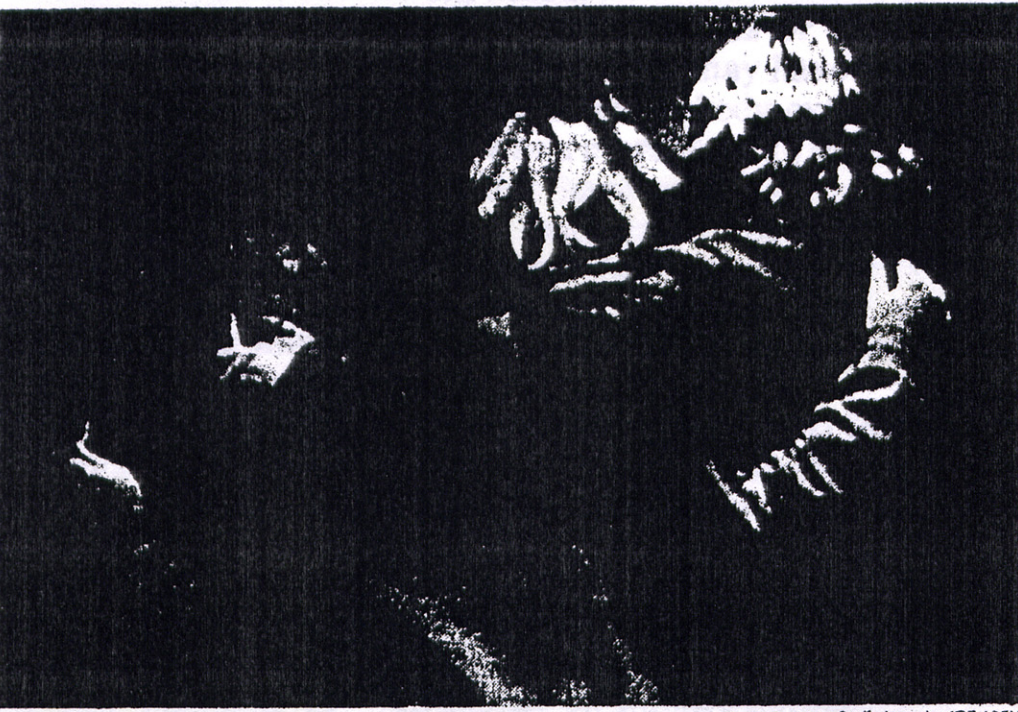
"This may make them at peace again. They still would forgive any person who did this. But they wouldn't want anybody to go through that again."

Matthiesen said he believed law enforcement offices have worked hard to solve the rape-slaying case.

"We really do appreciate the work that the police department has done. They have been very good, even though there was a difference in view point about the Cuban refugee situation, when they wanted the Catholic Family Services to release all their files on Cuban refugees."

"I think it was because they (the police) wanted to be sure that whoever did this would not do it again. They wanted to pursue every avenue they could," said Matthiesen.

"The police were giving the sisters 24-hour protection, and said they would continue that as long as



"Pure stroke of good investigation"...Hill, Neal and Baker announce arrest, top. Suspect's family huddle together at police station last night.

## Capital murder charges expected

By NANCY KECK  
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A 17-year-old North Amarillo youth was arrested last night and is expected to be charged today with capital murder in connection with the rape-slaying of Sister Tadea Benz, who was found dead on Halloween in her room at St. Francis Convent.

Johnny Garrett was arrested yesterday on a "threaten look and warrant" charging him with unauthorized use of a motor vehicle, said 47th District Attorney Danny Hill. Hill, Amarillo Police Chief Jerry Hill and Potter County Sheriff T.L. Baker held a joint press conference last night at the police department to release information about the arrest.

Garrett was arrested without resistance at about 9:15 p.m. yesterday at his home and will be formally charged sometime today with capital murder in connection with the slaying of the 76-year-old nun.

Garrett was being held last night in city jail, and is expected to be transferred today to Potter County jail.

Hill said the complaint to be filed today will allege that Garrett committed the murder while in the course of another felony, either burglary or rape.

"We think we can prove either burglary or rape," he said. Conviction of capital murder carries a mandatory punishment of either life in prison or death by injection.

Hill said that he will recommend that bail be denied for Garrett since he will be charged with a capital offense.

Garrett was "not a suspect until sometime today (yesterday)," Hill said. Police detective Sgt. Walter Yerger reportedly had been checking fingerprints in a number of area burglaries and matched Garrett's prints with those taken from the convent, Hill said.

He said the detective knew Garrett and "knew some of his habits, and, together with a couple other members of the combined investigative team that has been working on the murder of Sister Tadea, compiled enough evidence to arrest Garrett."

"We have fingerprints that link him to the crime, that were found in the room," Hill said. He would not elaborate on other evidence in the case, but said that some evidence — "which may or may not have anything to do with the crime" — was obtained from Garrett's home and will be tested.

"We still have a lot of evidence to run tests on," Hill said.

Hill declined comment on whether Garrett has a criminal record and

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## Nuns prayed

From 1-A

necessary. The sisters were very grateful for that."

Matthiesen also said though a murder suspect has been arrested, that Sister Tadea has been at peace with God for some time.

"In Sister Tadea's death and in her life, she gave a wonderful witness to her belief in God. Her whole life was a witness to her deep belief in God, she believed in Him and a future life, and I think she is with Him now," said Matthiesen.

"I think we would be thankful that — if this is the person and that of course remains to be seen — we would be glad the people could rest assured and not fear a repetition," the bishop said.

Sister Bernice, responding for the convent, said, "It wasn't so much that he (the murderer) would come back here to strike, but that he was in the area and that he would just strike again in Amarillo, or elsewhere, and kill another person. And, we didn't want that."

"I prayed for Sister Tadea. I didn't pray for her, I prayed to her, because I see her as a saint. She died at the hands of another person, and therefore I consider her a martyr," Sister Bernice said last night.

"I don't think we have only prayed at night. We have prayed everytime we were in chapel, and the sisters prayed individually to God through Sister Tadea's intercession."

"We prayed to Sister Tadea that she would go to God to get this favor."

Relief was one of the first emotions Sister Bernice experienced after she heard the news.

"I was very much relieved when I heard it. A great tension broke from my spirit when I heard it," said Sister Bernice. "When I prayed before it brought tears to my eyes everytime. Tears would come to my eyes and I would offer those tears, thinking of her, that maybe she couldn't even cry."

Sister Bernice was among "three carloads" of the 40 sisters of St. Francis Convent and nuns from other communities, who attended a

special seminar on rape at St. Anthony's Hospital Sunday night.

Presented by the Amarillo Police Department, the seminar taught Sister Bernice a great deal about the rape, rapists, and rape victims, she said.

"I learned that the people who do think like this, are sick. They have such a frustration within themselves that they have to strike out even at the innocent in order to release that heavy tension," said Sister Bernice. "I think that was the thing that really struck home to me the most."

Sister Bernice said if the suspect arrested is found to be Sister Tadea's murderer, the citizens of Amarillo should thank God also.

"Give thanks to God for his goodness and for His fatherly care of us. Sometimes we do have to wait for an answer and suffer in order that the necessary purification takes place," said Sister Bernice. "Sin is evil. And somewhere along the line, sin has to

be made up for. The consequence of the sin has to be made up for, by innocent people."

Sister Bernice said Sister Tadea was "at peace with God" before a suspect was ever charged in the nun's death.

"I feel that Sister Tadea is at peace," said Sister Bernice. "I feel too, that if she were here, she would tell us, 'Forgive him.'"

"But, let justice be done in his case," said Sister Bernice.

During the days that have followed Sister Tadea's death on Halloween morning, the retired nuns have been in the chapel praying on the hour, taking turns with other nuns who have tried to go about their daily routine.

"Sister Tadea herself was a very prayerful woman. And that's why I always turn to her every day for my part. And I would beg her, let the police find this man so that an end may be put to the evil which he does," said Sister Bernice.

"And I would beg God, the Father who also created him (the murderer), to let him be caught before he could strike again."

Last night, another nun was first to hear the news that a suspect had been arrested and charged in Sister Tadea's death. She went to Sister Bernice's office to tell her.

"I said, 'Oh, thank God, if it real-



# Suspect arrested

From 1-A

whether he had made a confession to the crime.

However, Garrett was being questioned by police detectives last night, and it was believed that he gave police a statement concerning the rape and slaying.

After the news conference last night, a woman believed to be Garrett's mother led three youths past reporters gathered in the halls of the police department, covered her head and burst into tears as the four hurriedly ducked into the Major Crimes Unit office.

Hill said Garrett lives "in the area where the crime occurred" — within walking distance of the convent, located at 4301 NE 18th.

He described Garrett as a white male with dark brown hair, and said Garrett is not presently a student and is believed to be unemployed.

Asked if Garrett is a suspect in connection with the July 9 rape-slaying of Narnie Bryson, 77, of 732 N. Houston, Hill said, "The Bryson murder case is still open." He said the investigation will continue in that case.

Hill praised the efforts of the Potter County Sheriff's Department and the Amarillo Police Department in obtaining evidence to arrest the suspect.

"The whole investigation was a concerted effort of the sheriff's off-

ice and police department," Hill said. "I would describe it as a pure stroke of good investigation."

He said he was "excited" that the case was solved so quickly — 10 days after the murder — in light of the fact that Sister Tadea's body had been removed from the convent and her room straightened before foul play was suspected and police were called.

"...Had another 12 or 15 hours gone by, the body may have been in the ground and nobody ever known there was a murder," Hill said.

Police have said that an argon laser fingerprint device their department had acquired recently had detected a partial print on a wood-handled knife found beneath the bed in the nun's room.

Sister Tadea's body was found at about 7:30 a.m. Oct. 31 on the floor beside the bed in her second-story room at St. Francis Convent after her absence from a 6:30 a.m. mass was noticed by another sister.

She had been raped, beaten and strangled, an autopsy showed.

Police said that other nuns at the convent at first thought that Sister Tadea had died either an accidental death or natural death, and foul play was not suspected until after a broken window was found in the large community room on the north side of the convent at about 9:30 a.m.

that day.

When police arrived at the convent to investigate the break-in, they were informed that a nun had died earlier that morning. The nuns told police that after they had found Sister Tadea's body, they notified an Amarillo doctor, who told them to send the body to a local funeral home.

Police learned that the body was being embalmed and called Potter County Justice of the Peace L.B. Bartlett, who called the funeral home and ordered the embalming stopped, pending further investigation.

Police said an autopsy indicated that Sister Tadea's death occurred at about 4 or 4:30 a.m. Oct. 31.

Detectives said a long pane of glass, one of four in the community room window, had been broken. A two-by-four board about 19 inches long, found on the pavement under the window, might have been used to break the glass, police said.

Police originally believed that the same person who killed Sister Tadea was responsible for the rape-murder of Mrs. Bryson, who was found beaten and strangled to death in a bedroom of her northeast Amarillo home.

A 28-year-old Cuban refugee being held by police on another charge of burglary and attempted rape was earlier considered to be a suspect in the nun's slaying. After evidence was returned from testing at the FBI lab in Washington, D.C., local officials said the evidence proved inconclusive, and they might have been "prematurely optimistic" in hoping to have a suspect so quickly.

Evidence found in Sister Tadea's room at the convent and tested at the FBI lab included hairs, bloody sheets and the knife found under the bed.