Flying Father in coma after collapse in hockey game
FRANCINE DUBÉ

He turned his back on professional hockey to follow in the footsteps of the patron saint of the poor and in doing so, Father Les Costello became the kind of man an entire city prays for.

December 9, 2002 - Residents of Timmins, Ont., are praying for Father Costello now, as he lies in a coma in critical but stable condition at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, his relatives and closest friends at his side.

A former Toronto Maple Leaf who helped the team win the Stanley Cup in 1947-48, Father Costello, 74, was knocked unconscious last week in a fall to the ice during a game with the Flying Fathers, the team of madcap priests he helped found in 1962 and that became the Harlem Globetrotters of hockey.

Three days after the fall in Guelph, Father Costello collapsed during a game in Peterborough.

"Right now, we're all in shock, we're all praying for him," said parishioner Ed Pupich, who is also president of the Ontario Hockey Federation.

Although Father Costello is a Catholic priest, his door has always been open to everyone and concern for his health cuts across all denominations, Mr. Pupich said.

"No matter where you go, people are asking, 'How is he?' "

Les Costello once had a promising career as an NHL player. He was a graduate of St. Michael's College School in Toronto, which has produced more than 100 NHL players, including Frank Mahovlich and Brett Lindros.

As a junior, he scored 62 points in 29 games in the 1946-47 season and helped his team win two Memorial Cups in three years. He was brought up from the minors for the playoffs in 1948 and scored two goals and assisted on two others in five games. He played only 15 games the next season, when he left the Leafs for the priesthood.

Leaving behind the Canadian boyhood dream of a career in the NHL was a struggle, said Father Tim Shea, a parish priest in Kingston who used to play with the Flying Fathers.

"He was so gifted as a hockey player, and yet it just seemed that God wanted him to try the priesthood," Father Shea said. "He chose to do what God wanted him to do and is tremendously happy doing that. I don't think he's ever had a sad day in the priesthood. Every minute he's alive, I think he sees himself as an instrument of God."

All his sermons begin with a joke. He believes that laughter is good for the soul.

"Sometimes they're a little off-colour, but he gets away with it," says George Stefanić, president of the parish council in Schumacher, Ont., now a part of Timmins. "People like him because he's just a genuine person."

The light-hearted approach belies a deep faith and commitment to service, in particular to the poor. Throughout his long career as a priest, Father Costello's rectory door has never been locked. Anyone can come in and sleep on the couch or the floor — from the indigent to the tired to the simply drunk.

"You'd get up in the morning and sometimes there would be two or three strangers there, sleeping on the rug," Father Shea said.
Father Les Costello runs an apostolate named after St. Martin de Porres, the patron saint of the poor, giving out food and furniture for free. As a young man, he used to deliver the furniture himself, Father Shea said.

In 1962, he helped found a hockey team made up of parish priests. Their routine featured hockey sketches that included a Flying Nun and a clown in diapers. They travelled Canada and the United States. They toured Europe in 1970, during which they were granted an audience with Pope Paul VI at the Vatican.

When the Pope held upside down a hockey stick that had been given him, Father Costello showed him how to hold it the proper way.

"Try it the other way, your excellency. If you hold it that way, people will think you're stirring spaghetti," he said.

The Flying Fathers have raised more than $4-million for charity since the team's inception.

In a strange twist of fate, a brush with death in 1979 nearly brought Father Costello and his fellow priestly hockey players to Hollywood.

An avid hunter, Father Costello became lost in the woods for 28 hours and lost eight toes to frostbite. The story, and his involvement with the Flying Fathers, bounced from the Canadian press to the American press, into People magazine and from People on to a television show called Real People.

Director Francis Ford Coppola saw the show and suddenly Hollywood was calling. In 1982, the priests were paid $15,000 for a one-year option, money they promptly donated to charity.

Father Shea said the idea fell apart when Wayne Gretzky, who had been pegged to star in the movie, failed a screen test. But the trip to Los Angeles proved fruitful for the Great One. While he was there he appeared as a judge on a dance show alongside Janet Jones, the woman who later became his wife.

The Hollywood-calling stories are droll, but those close to Father Costello are quick to point out the real measure of the man lies not in his skill on the ice, but in his life-long performance as a parish priest, a job he has loved above all else.

"He was just going to be himself, and he hoped that by being himself that would help other people be closer to God," Father Shea says. "I think he succeeded."

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**December 12, 2002** - Father Les Costello, the Toronto Maple Leaf who left the NHL to pursue the priesthood, was remembered yesterday by songstress Shania Twain, who grew up in Timmins and whose family was the recipient of many acts of charity by him.

"Father Costello has been there for my family many times over the years," said Ms. Twain, who now lives in Switzerland, and whose new album, Up!, is topping the charts. "Whether it was to find my grandmother a second-hand fridge; marry my parents; give our family funeral services -- including our beloved Mom and Dad; or just plain joining in on a good joke.

"He's always quick to smile and share his zest for life. The goodness of God is with this very special man and he shares that spirit with everyone around him. We all love him."

Father Costello died on Tuesday afternoon of head injuries sustained in a fall to the ice during a game with the Flying Fathers, the hockey team of Roman Catholic priests he helped found in 1962, which has raised $4-million for charity.

Ms. Twain and her four siblings were raised in Timmins and her family was at times impoverished -- the children brought mustard sandwiches to school. When Ms. Twain was 21, her parents were killed when their car collided head-on with a logging truck, and she was left to raise her three youngest siblings on her own.

Father Costello ran a charity from his church that delivered furniture and gave out food to the needy in the community.
Visitation will be held at St. Alphonsus Church, Timmins, this Saturday and Sunday between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. His funeral will take place on Monday at 11 a.m. at the church.

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