

Fr. Rooney's body recovered after 4-day search; archbishop says he was a 'beloved pastor'

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Mourners gather at St. Joseph Parish in Trenton on Monday night to pray for Fr. Stephen Rooney and Robert Chiles, pastor and longtime parishioner, respectively, who went missing after a boating accident Sunday in the Detroit River. Authorities located the body of Chiles, 52, on Tuesday night, while the search continues for Fr. Rooney. (Naomi Vrazo | Special to Detroit Catholic)

Priest found in Lake Erie two days after authorities located parishioner Robert Chiles, ending tragic week following Detroit River boat accident

GROSSE ILE — Authorities have recovered the body of Fr. Stephen Rooney, pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Trenton, four days after he and parishioner Robert Chiles went missing after a tragic boating accident on the Detroit River.

Grosse Ile police said a fishing charter boat found Fr. Rooney's body around 9 a.m. Thursday floating in Lake Erie near Stony Point in Monroe County.

The boat's operators notified the U.S. Coast Guard, culminating a search for Fr. Rooney and Chiles that had included divers, boats and helicopters from several local law enforcement agencies.

Authorities found the body of Chiles, a 52-year-old parishioner of St. Joseph in Trenton, on Tuesday evening after a search of the Detroit River where he and Fr. Rooney went missing Sunday after their boat capsized near Stony Island off Grosse Ile.

At the news, Detroit Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron offered his sympathies to the Rooney and Chiles families, as well as the St. Joseph community.

"I am deeply grieved by Sunday's tragic boating incident and the loss of Fr. Rooney and St. Joseph parishioner Robert Chiles," Archbishop Vigneron said. "Father was a beloved pastor and my deepest condolences go out to the parish community in this time of grief. I offer my condolences, as well, to the Chiles family. We are ardently praying for the eternal repose of this priest and his parishioner."

"We turn to our merciful Savior in prayer for those who mourn them, with great

confidence in his promise to bring us to his Kingdom,” the archbishop added. “Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.”

A native of Belfast, Ireland, Fr. Rooney had served as pastor of St. Joseph since 2018. His family members both in Michigan and Ireland were notified of the recovery of his body Thursday morning.

Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Gerard W. Battersby led a prayer vigil for the two men Monday night at St. Joseph, where hundreds gathered to pray and tell stories about the two men, each friends known for their generosity of spirit.

Police believe the accident occurred when Chiles, who owned the 39-foot speedboat, turned and hit a strong wake, flipping the watercraft and sending its 14 passengers overboard.

A passing boat from Ontario rescued most of those on board, including seven children, but Chiles and Fr. Rooney remained missing. Among the other passengers was Msgr. Charles Kosanke, rector of the Basilica of Ste. Anne and pastor of Most Holy Trinity Parish in Detroit, and Chiles’ three children. Minor injuries were reported, but all are recovering.

Msgr. Kosanke told *Detroit Catholic* he suffered “several bruises from the rolling of the boat” but otherwise is getting “stronger every day.”

“The boating accident was an unspeakable tragedy that has affected the lives of many wonderful people,” Msgr. Kosanke said. “I am very grateful for the quick and unselfish response of nearby people whose actions prevented further loss of life. I continue to grieve tremendously for Fr. Stephen Rooney and Bob Chiles. May they rest in peace in eternal life.

“I deeply sympathize with their loved ones and their fellow parishioners,” Msgr. Kosanke added. “May they experience the hope that comes from the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I am grateful to God that I survived this horrible accident and can continue to faithfully serve his Church. ... I have appreciated the tremendous expression of love and prayers of many people.”

According to friends at the prayer vigil, Fr. Rooney had befriended Chiles, president of Alta Equipment Group Inc. in Livonia, after the funeral of Chiles’ wife, 51-year-old Christine Chiles, whose body was found last September in the Detroit River.

Friends and family spoke glowingly of the two men Monday night, saying the two shared a welcoming personality and gave generously of themselves.

“To be treated with the gift of hospitality by Fr. Rooney is to be treated truly like an honored guest,” said friend and fellow pastor Fr. Marc Gawronski of Sacred Heart Parish on Grosse Ile.

Likewise, “the welcome one receives at the homes of the Chiles family ... is a place where love is shared in a courageous and joyful way,” Fr. Gawronski added. “Wherever we are, as followers of Jesus, we have men like Fr. Rooney and Rob and his family, people who prepare a place for another.”

Fr. Rooney was a frequent guest in the classrooms of St. Joseph School, known for his good humor and captivating Irish brogue.

“He had a great sense of humor, loved the kids,” St. Joseph parishioner Laurie Gilbert said. “He had a real rapport with the kids. Always laughing and teasing with the children. His homilies were phenomenal; they struck home all the time. They spoke directly to your heart.”

Funeral details for Chiles and Fr. Rooney have not yet been set.

*Memorial Mass and
Celebration of
the life of*



Very Rev. Fr Stephen Rooney

10th February 1954—20th August 2020



*St. Matthew's Church, Belfast
8th September 2020*