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Thieves confess, but relic of Blessed John Paul II still missing

by Francis X. Rocca by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — Less than a week after a relic of Blessed John Paul II disappeared from a country chapel east of Rome, Italian police arrested two men for the theft, but the venerated piece of fabric stained with the late pope's blood was still missing.

Italian media reported Thursday that police had found an empty iron reliquary, along with a stolen cross, buried on the grounds of a drug treatment facility in the city of L'Aquila, about 75 miles east of Rome. Two men in their early 20s, who were being questioned in connection with another crime, confessed they had stolen the objects and then revealed their location to police.

But the men said they had discarded the relic itself -- reportedly a piece of the clothing Blessed John Paul was wearing when he was shot May 13, 1981 -- by throwing it into some bushes near the facility. Members of Italy's specialized scientific police were searching the grounds.

The relic and the cross were first reported missing from the church of San Pietro della Ienca over the weekend of Jan. 25-26. The church, where Blessed John Paul often prayed, is located 13 miles north of L'Aquila, in the mountainous Abruzzo region where the late pope frequently went on brief vacations.

Polish Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz of Krakow, who served as Blessed John Paul's personal secretary during his pontificate, gave the relic to the chapel in recognition of the late pope's many visits.

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