

# Police investigate sale of infant formula

By Sikho Ntshobane and Zolile Menzelwa

THE spiritual leader of the St Theresa's Roman Catholic Church in Queenstown has come out guns blazing, accusing the Health Department and the police of tarnishing the church's good name, following a raid which uncovered illegal formula which was allegedly being sold illegally.

The raid followed after The Rep senior reporter Sikho Ntshobane, who was following up on information supplied to the newspaper, had successfully purchased a 400g tin of the formula for R35 at the St Theresa's Mission in Scanlan Street last Thursday.

Attempts were made at the time to solicit confirmation from the local police, the Hawks and the Special Investigating Unit (SIU), but to no avail.

The priest, who may not yet be named as he had not pleaded in court, was arrested in a raid conducted by the Queenstown police and officials from the Health Department later the same day and 1 400 tins were confiscated.

He was quoted in the Daily Dispatch as saying that other Catholic churches in Lady Frere, Cofimvaba and Dutywa were also selling the formula. The Dispatch reported that two other Catholic priests had

been arrested in connection with the selling of the formula in Cofimvaba and Dutywa respectively.

Queenstown police spokesperson Warrant Officer Namhla Mdeleleni told The Rep this week that Cofimvaba Father Karl Fringes had been released after charges were dropped due to a lack of evidence. "The prosecutor indicated there was no proof that the milk had been stolen," Mdeleleni said.

Health Department spokesman Sizwe Kupelo earlier told The Rep he was "reluctant to respond to queries as there were still investigations ongoing."

The formula is reportedly meant to be given to underprivileged children for free with the tins emblazoned with a "not for resale" sign on the side.

When contacted by the Rep on Wednesday, the priest confirmed that he had been charged with being in possession of suspected stolen goods. He is currently out on R5 000 bail following a court appearance with the case postponed to May 31.

In a telephonic interview, he lashed out at the department, the police and the media over what he termed "defamation of his character and tarnishing the church's good name".

He also confirmed that he had been selling the formula for the past 24 years, with the product purchased from Nestlé by the church. "You have to have clear proof before you arrest someone. I believe what happened is tantamount to defamation of my character and the church."

When asked if he felt what the church was doing was illegal, he said there was a difference between not for sale and not for resale, but did not explain what the difference was.

Nestlé South Africa spokesman Ravi Pillay said the company was extremely concerned about the matter and "we are working closely with the relevant authorities on this matter. We do not wish to comment further as a full investigation is underway."

Mdeleleni confirmed investigations were ongoing.

The Rep is in possession of a quotation from Nestlé (South Africa) Pty Ltd for St Theresa's for the purchase of infant formula in 2008 and a supplier number.

Section 1(3) of the Licence Consolidation Act No 32 of 1935 also states that charitable, religious and educational institutions of a public character were not required to hold a licence for the purpose of carrying on any trade, occupation or business.



**ALL ABOVE BOARD?** The Rep senior reporter Sikho Ntshobane bought a tin of infant formula at St Theresa's Roman Catholic Church as part of an undercover operation to investigate claims that the formula, which is not meant for resale, was being sold from the premises.

Picture: ZOLILE MENZELWA