February 13, 2007 – **Bad Housekeeping**
Commonweal, The Editors

Rev. Rodney Rodis had a reputation as a people-centered leader who was especially good with kids. This may have had something to do with the fact that—as his parishioners were stunned to discover last month—he lived in a subdivision with a "wife" and three children. Rodis, a fifty-year-old priest of the Diocese of Richmond, Virginia, apparently found it difficult to support his lifestyle on a cleric's salary. According to police, he supplemented his income by stealing close to $1 million from his two parishes over the past five years. Police say the alleged theft was facilitated by his ability, as a parish priest, to open church bank accounts with just one signature: his own.

Unfortunately, stories like Rodis's are all too common. With the Catholic Church still reeling from the sexual-abuse crisis, a new series of financial scandals is threatening to further erode the laity's trust in their bishops. Even as some dioceses have gone bankrupt paying abuse-settlement claims, priests and laypeople alike have been exploiting the lax financial regulations in parishes across the country to line their pockets with church funds. A Villanova University survey released in January found that 85 percent of responding dioceses had uncovered embezzlement in the past five years. Eleven percent reported thefts of over half a million dollars, and one-third lost up to fifty thousand dollars. This means a minimum of $4 million has been pilfered since 2002.

These findings must not have surprised the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Over the past four decades, the conference has intermittently addressed the issue of diocesan accounting and reporting practices. In 2002, the Committee on Budget and Finance published a new diocesan financial-practices handbook, emphasizing a bishop's financial responsibilities under canon law. The manual contains a resolution urging each bishop to send an annual letter updating his metropolitan archbishop on his diocese's financial situation. The resolution suggests that the letter include the names of diocesan finance council members, the dates they met, and a statement affirming that they have reviewed the diocese's financial statements.

All good ideas—and all completely unenforceable. No matter how emphatic, the USCCB statements have no binding force. The conference can only make recommendations; without Vatican approval, it lacks authority to require individual bishops to adhere to its resolutions. This is particularly troubling, given that a mere 3 percent of dioceses in the Villanova survey report performing annual audits of their parishes. Theft is easiest at the local level because many dioceses simply don't keep tabs on the assets of parishes and how their pastors handle them.

Canon law is quite clear about the need for and the composition of diocesan finance councils (DFC). Appointed by the bishop, the DFC must comprise at least three members with financial expertise and no close family ties to the bishop, each one sitting for a five-year term of office. Canon law even specifies the DFC's functions, from reviewing diocesan budgets to approving large-value property sales. Alas, no such clarity exists when it comes to parish finance councils. While canon law says that every parish must have one, no one knows how many of the country's nineteen thousand parishes actually do. Furthermore, the parish finance council can have whatever makeup and mandate its pastor deems fit. This can spell disaster for a parish with a negligent or devious pastor.

Yet canon law contains a provision bishops should take advantage of—namely, that parish finance councils be "regulated...by norms issued by the diocesan bishop." A reform-minded bishop could decree that parishes be audited every year, that pastors send detailed financial statements to the chancery twice annually, that two signatures be required to established bank accounts in a church's name—or any of the commonsense safeguards recently recommended by the mostly lay committee that advises the USCCB on financial matters.

Such safeguards could have prevented the grotesque abuses allegedly committed by Fr. Rodis. But they require firm direction from above; and it is disheartening in this regard to learn that Rodis's indictment has not yet persuaded the Diocese of Richmond to revise its decade-old financial policies. As parish-level donations begin to rebound following the sexual-abuse crisis, the laity doesn't need another reason to lighten the collection basket. Bishops should act to keep their houses in order. The time for reform is now.