

July 23, 2007 - Chicago Priest admits stealing \$200K

By Eric Herman, Chicago Herald News

The Rev. Mark Sorvillo loved taking his parish's money and spending it on himself. Trips to Rome, Venice, Paris. And \$900 meals at New York restaurants.

In 1999, Sorvillo found someone else to lavish his parishioners' collection-plate donations on--a male stripper.

Sorvillo--who pleaded guilty Friday to stealing nearly \$200,000 from St. Margaret Mary parish on the North Side--gave cars, plane tickets and thousands of dollars in cash to James Sosnicki, a married Louisville man who stripped frequently at gay clubs in Chicago, law enforcement sources said.

Reached in Louisville, Sosnicki told the Chicago Sun-Times he paid Sorvillo back--and said their relationship was never sexual.

"He was like a big uncle to me," Sosnicki, 30, said Thursday. "If it wasn't for him, I'd probably be living in a cardboard box right now."

Sorvillo's lawyer, Brian Collins, declined to comment.

Caught stealing

Sorvillo resigned from St. Margaret Mary in February 2006 after parishioners caught him stealing from the collection bags. He had been under suspicion since threatening to close the church's school because of the parish's strained finances. An investigation revealed he skimmed more than \$40,000 from collections, wrote checks from parish accounts to himself and his creditors and charged more than \$62,000 at Neiman Marcus, Bloomingdale's and Marshall Field's to the parish. In October 2006, prosecutors charged him with felony theft. Sorvillo, 54, will likely serve two years of his four-year sentence, according to prosecutors. Originally from the west suburbs, he became pastor of St. Margaret Mary in 1994 and, according to court documents, began stealing in 1997. About 800 families belong to the parish, including the family of Cook County State's Attorney Dick Devine.

While investigating Sorvillo, authorities learned the priest had bought and insured an Acura in Louisville--and discovered the driver was one James Sosnicki. While searching the rectory at St. Margaret Mary, investigators found naked photos of a dark-haired man who turned out to be Sosnicki, according to law enforcement sources. One showed Sosnicki sleeping naked in the rectory bed.

Investigators also found a poster advertising the 2004 "International Mr. Leather" competition --featuring Sosnicki as one of the models.

In December, Chicago detectives traveled to Louisville to interview Sosnicki. He told police he first met Sorvillo at Madrigal's, a gay bar in the 5300 block of North Clark.

"Mark told me he was a teacher at Loyola University. It wasn't until I stayed with Mark at the rectory, St. Margaret Mary, that I realized he was a priest," Sosnicki told police, according to a police report reviewed by the Sun-Times.

Footing the bill

Sosnicki came to Chicago two or three times a month, he said, stripping at gay bars such as Madrigal's, Man's Country and Cocktails. He made \$50 to \$100 a night, plus tips, he told police.

Sorvillo paid for his plane tickets to Chicago, Sosnicki said--though he claims he paid Sorvillo back when he could. Sosnicki usually stayed at the rectory, but he sometimes stayed in hotels, with Sorvillo footing the bill.

The priest even paid when Sosnicki's wife came along. "Mark would give me his credit card number, and I would book it over the Internet," he told police.

Sorvillo gave Sosnicki his credit card to take on a trip to Los Angeles, and took him and a man called "Arti" to New York City, where they stayed in the theater district and "went to a lot of plays," Sosnicki said.

They also sampled New York's gay club scene. "Mark wanted to have an encounter with another man, so Arti and I helped pick out a guy/prostitute at the club," Sosnicki told police. "Mark and the guy went back to the hotel. They were gone about an hour."

In addition to the Acura, Sorvillo helped buy Sosnicki a motorcycle and his wife a car. The priest bought Sosnicki clothes and a Dell computer, too, according to the police report.

Sorvillo also made cash deposits into Sosnicki's account at U.S. Bank. "For about a year or so, Mark would give me about \$1,000 a month," Sosnicki told police. "He gave me the money for spending time with him."

Authorities are not sure how much money Sorvillo gave Sosnicki over the years. But "it appears that the priest was supporting him," a police source said.

Sosnicki has a history of run-ins with the law, including arrests for drugs, trespassing and disorderly conduct.

When questioned by police, he provided them insight into Sorvillo's character, calling the priest a "lost soul."

"Mark lived two separate lives: one with the priesthood, and his 'other' lifestyle," he said.