

The revelation that the Rev. Michael Moynihan has lived with his church's former choir director is the last thing the Diocese of Bridgeport wants right now, after a tumultuous period involving rogue priests had finally seemed to quiet down.

But it's hard to believe the diocese's claim that the newest scandal, unearthed by a New York City tabloid, "came as a complete surprise." And if that's true, well, it shouldn't have been.

The diocese's record in these matters has been one of reaction, and often inadequate reaction at that. The fact is it should have known that its priest was living in New York in circumstances that cast serious suspicion not only on his vow of celibacy, but on his handling of the church's finances - especially when, according to several reports, the relationship has been an "open secret" for years.

The people of the diocese deserve better protection and better accountability from the organization in which they place not only their faith, but a good deal of their money.

The diocese this week announced it has stripped Rev. Moynihan of his priestly authority after the New York Post called asking for comment about the fact that the former pastor of St. Michael Church in Greenwich shares a Manhattan apartment with another man. According to the newspaper, the two have been living together for a decade.

The diocese forced Rev. Moynihan to resign from St. Michael last year after he couldn't account for roughly \$1 million in parish funds and evidence surfaced that he had kept two secret bank accounts. There were rumors at the time of the relationship between Rev. Moynihan and the former choir director, Michael Fawcett, diocesan officials say, but they found no proof.

The diocese, after being alerted by The Post last week, confirmed that Rev. Moynihan leased the apartment on 40th Street where Mr. Fawcett lives. It's premature to say that the former priest has paid for the apartment with parishioners' money, but that needs to be determined quickly. Rev. Moynihan's supporters in the past have said his family paid for his lavish lifestyle of luxury cars and power boats. The only thing that's clear at this point is that no one pays for a Manhattan apartment on a priest's salary. According to The Post, the apartment rent is estimated at \$3,000 to \$4,000 a month.

The case, of course, closely echoes that of another Diocese of Bridgeport parish, St. John Church in Darien, where former pastor Michael Jude Fay was caught stealing parish funds in part to pay for a lavish lifestyle for him and his lover, a male Philadelphia wedding planner.

In that case, frustration with the diocese's lackluster response to apparent financial irregularities led a parish employee and its parochial vicar to hire a private investigator, who uncovered Rev. Fay's wrongdoings.

In both cases, there is at least the appearance that the diocese chose to look the other way, especially when it came to the issue of violating priestly vows. Beyond the vow and the holy discipline it requires, celibacy is intended, in part, to allow a priest to focus on his flock, to be available to them in their times of need, undistracted by the other earthly demands that having a spouse and family would bring.

By looking the other way on priests openly living in romantic relationships, the diocese is failing to assure that its people are well-served on Earth by those it has put in place to serve them.

The most recent problem was exacerbated by the fact that the diocese only shared news of Rev. Moynihan's living arrangements after it had already been reported in the press.

"This is an unfortunate announcement of a controversial nature that we didn't think families of the parish would want sprung on them at Sunday Mass," diocese spokesman Joseph McAleer said.

But the diocese should have learned by now that when people learn bad news from a third party, it is worsened by the suspicion that those who are supposed to look out for them - in this case the diocese - are not on the up and up.

Many parishioners at St. Michael's stood by Rev. Moynihan after the initial allegations, and many may stand by him still. That speaks to the faith they have in his devoutness as a priest. But others who also revered Rev. Moynihan have had that faith badly shaken. In such cases, they are the diocese's primary responsibility, although it has not always seemed that way.

The diocese owes it to them to be more pro-active and transparent when it comes to dealing with rogue priests.