

'Father Nicky', secretary accused of stealing \$64,000 from church

By William Johnson; The Daily World (LA); October 8, 2006

Despite an internal investigation lasting several weeks, the Diocese of Lafayette found nothing to implicate Port Barre's Fr. Charles Nicholas Trahan, who was arrested on Friday for 84 counts of theft from Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church.

Trahan has been charged with allegedly stealing \$64,000 from the church over two years. But according to a statement released by the Diocese, the church was not aware of the evidence that led to Trahan's arrest. Trahan, 58, who denies the charges, has been released on a \$25,000 bond.

The incident came to light earlier this week when Ramona Speyer, the church's longtime secretary, was arrested and charged with 70 felony theft charges.

"She is being re-arrested and charged with 14 more counts," Port Barre Police Chief David Richard said Friday afternoon.

Speyer was allegedly Trahan's accomplice in the thefts that occurred between 2004 and 2006. Although an initial figure of \$64,000 has been given, Richard estimated the amount may eventually total more than \$200,000.

"The investigation is ongoing," Richard said. "There is no telling what we will turn up. The more we look into it, the more we find."

According to Richard, under questioning Speyer, 50, of Arnaudville, provided information that led to Trahan's arrest.

"The lady implicated him up and down," Richard said. "According to her statements both received benefits from the scheme."

Trahan is scheduled to go before 27th Judicial District Court Judge Ellis Daigle for arraignment Monday morning in Opelousas.

Richard said the matter was first brought to his attention by a law firm representing the Diocese of Lafayette.

"They had done their own audit and investigation process," Richard said. "They alerted us to possible theft within the church boundaries."

Richard said that audit showed that between July 2004 and July 2006 no cash was deposited in the church accounts. Police believe checks turned in during the weekly collection at the church were deposited but all cash donations were siphoned off.

"We feel the motive is something in the gambling area," Richard said.

Trahan, known to most in this largely Catholic community as simply 'Father Nicky,' had previously served as pastor of St. Landry Catholic Church in Opelousas. Since arriving here, he has proven to be extremely popular with parishioners.

"This is a sad day for all of us," said Richard, himself a member of Trahan's church. "This is going to rock our little town."

Richard said Speyer has been the church's secretary for the past eight to nine years but was dismissed in September following the church audit. "She was confronted about the missing money. That just threw up all kinds of red flags," Richard said. She is currently being held without bond.

The Diocese has placed Trahan on administrative leave, and Msgr. Robert Romero has been put in charge of the church. In the Diocese's statement, Bishop Michael Jarrell asked church members not to judge Trahan until the investigation is finished.

"Without knowing all the facts, however, I again ask everyone to withhold judgment as we pray for divine assistance and guidance for all involved," the statement read.