

June 3, 2007 - A lack of shame in church scandal
The Stamford Advocate, Editorial

That disgraced Rev. Michael Jude Fay would conduct some sort of appeal for help in paying his legal bills seems mind-boggling. After all, those bills arise from accusations that he took over \$1 million from an area parish while he was its pastor to support a lavish lifestyle for himself and his boyfriend. We concede the principle of "innocent until proven guilty." But at least some sort of guilt on the part of this former leader of St. John Roman Catholic Church in Darien already is evident to many: His unpriestly lifestyle was well documented, and he already has transferred to the parish, as partial repayment, his half of a luxury Florida condominium that he owned with the boyfriend.

Yet the Rev. Fay's plea for donations probably should not come as a surprise. Rather, it may well be a reflection of how popular culture indulges both celebrities who run afoul of the law and those made into celebrities because they run afoul of the law. Think Paris Hilton, who some observers said will benefit from a higher profile after a drunken driving conviction. Or even our own ex-Gov. John Rowland, who has been on the lecture circuit exploiting his notoriety from serving a jail term for corruption.

The immediacy of the St. John scandal no doubt heightens the sense of outrage among parishioners and the public in our area. But for many of us, wouldn't this be entertaining as a story on some tabloid news show if only it was a bit more removed from our lives?

According to reporting by Staff Writers Angela Carella and Stephen P. Clark, the reverend's letter was sent from Ft. Lauderdale to family and friends (perhaps some of them ex-friends now), apparently including a number of St. John parishioners. It says in part: "As you can only imagine, this past year has been complicated and extremely painful. ... I am reaching out to my friends and family for help. I don't know if there is anything you can do or may want to do to help me, but if you choose to I would be very eternally grateful."

But acknowledgment of any culpability does not seem to be present. Instead, the letter serves as a reminder of how the Rev. Fay victimized his church, said Bill Rowe, a deacon at St. John and lifelong parishioner.

While Mr. Rowe said he did not receive a copy of the letter, he heard about it from another parishioner.

"You think he would ask for forgiveness and then ask for some money," he observed.

Yes, you'd think so. But unfortunately, that is not the style these days, as we have seen with many unrepentant "bad boys" and "bad girls" whose exploits nevertheless enthrall us.

We have laws to punish bad behavior. But society used to offer its own punishment - in addition to the law or instead of it - shunning those who broke the rules. Now, with popular culture essentially rewarding such people, we need to consider whether it invites those lacking conscience to make us their victims with hardly a thought given to public disgrace.

The Rev. Fay may serve as a case in point.