

Priests accused of taking \$8.6 million

BY STEPHANIE SLATER, Palm Beach Post, on web page of The Miami Herald (FL); 9/28/06

DELRAY BEACH - Two former priests at St. Vincent Ferrer Catholic Church in Delray Beach have been accused of misappropriating \$8.6 million from the church during the past 40 years.

Delray Beach police alleged that they skimmed cash from the offertory and used the money for personal profit.

Former pastors John Skehan and Francis Guinan were both charged with grand theft over \$100,000.

"These guys lived the life they told everyone else not to live in and they lived it on everyone else's dime," police spokesman officer Jeff Messer said. "And one of the seven deadly sins is greed."

Skehan, 79, was arrested Wednesday night at Palm Beach International Airport on a flight from Ireland, where he reportedly owned property.

He was remorseful as he confessed to taking the money, Detective Thomas Whatley said.

Guinan, who became head priest in 2003, is alleged to have taken \$400,000 for his personal use, including paying for his gambling habit and trips to the Bahamas and Las Vegas.

A warrant has been issued for Guinan, detectives said.

"They are professional money launderers," Whatley said. "They knew how to do it."

The investigation started more than a year ago when a concerned parishioner - concerned that the Diocese of Palm Beach would keep the theft a secret - sent an anonymous letter to Palm Beach County State Attorney Barry Krischer's office.

An accounting firm, hired by the diocese, conducted a forensic audit of Skehan and Guinan's numerous bank accounts.

Skehan reportedly deposited nearly \$1.6 million in four banks accounts in cash, donation checks written by congregants, donated stock sales from the building fund and bequeathed money, according to his arrest report.

He used \$134,075 to pay for his alleged lover's expenses, gave \$11,688 to family members and used another \$268,630 for personal expenses, including car payments, dental work, property taxes, credit card payments and condo association fees, according to the report.

But he also used some of the money to help pay church expenses, Whatley said.

"What you had is one priest who did a lot of good for the church over 40 years ... and another priest that came in after retirement who went ballistic with the fund," Whatley said.

That priest is reportedly Guinan, who is accused of taking an estimated \$400,000 in the past three years. And that's just the money detectives say they know about.

Guinan is alleged to have spent at least \$90,000 of it on airline, hotels and restaurants in Las Vegas and the Bahamas, according to Mike Driscoll, special agent supervisor for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, which assisted in the investigation.

The investigation also found that he spent money on dental and medical expenses, decorating his home and paying the Cardinal Newman High School tuition for his alleged lover's son, according to the report.

"The allegations against them involving this grand theft is sinful," FDLE special agent in charge Amos Rojas said. "These two individuals really betrayed not only their own church and their parishioners but those people that they were really ordained to help the ones who can't help themselves."