

12-3-07 - Prison is appropriate for fallen priest

Op-ED, Greenwich Time (CT)

When he is sentenced tomorrow, there is no doubt that the former pastor of a Roman Catholic parish in Darien must serve time behind bars for his embezzlement of more than \$1 million from his church and its parishioners over a nearly seven-year period.

Father Michael Jude Fay betrayed his parishioners, his bishop and the Diocese of Bridgeport, as well as his vows as a priest, in embezzling church money to support a lifestyle of luxury, including vacation trips around the globe, furniture, clothing, dining and a Florida condominium he bought with his boyfriend,.

Father Fay, who served as pastor of St. John Roman Catholic Church in Darien from 1991 to 2006, pleaded guilty to federal charges last September.

A 2006 audit by the Diocese of Bridgeport found Fay inappropriately spent \$1.4 million over a six-year period, although the priest claimed in court that he stole a total somewhere between \$400,000 and \$1 million.

Father Fay's case, which was brought to public light by the church's bookkeeper and another priest serving in the parish, led to diocesan reforms on the fiscal accountability of its parishes.

Recommended prison terms for federal cases are guided by how much was stolen. Federal prosecutors have urged the judge to impose a 44-month sentence at minimum, while the federal guidelines recommend a range of 46 to 57 months.

It must be noted that there have been calls for leniency in the case. Father Fay's attorney says his prostate cancer is terminal, and supporters have highlighted his positive acts over the years.

Yet there has been little evidence of contrition on the disgraced priest's part. First, the embezzlement was not a one-time slip-up but a pattern of conduct that occurred for years.

Then last spring, he sent a letter to family and friends in the area seeking donations to help pay his legal bills. That letter didn't even include an "I'm sorry" regarding his violation of trust.

There was no apology either when he admitted his crimes in court.

That suggests a continuing sense of entitlement on the part of the former pastor that flies in the face of one supporter's assessment that he has "never forgotten his humble beginnings." Other supporters focused on the comfort he consistently gave to the terminally ill and their families. But the idea that one can consciously commit bad acts while wiping them clean with good ones seems morally flawed.

One has to have sympathy for his medical condition. However, it is fair to say that Father Fay has otherwise done little good for his leniency request.

The overriding point is that the priest be sentenced to sufficient time in prison.

Much like several corruption cases involving state and local politicians in Connecticut in recent years, the Fay case and its outcome must serve as a stern warning to others - whether clerics, politicians, bookkeepers or chief financial officers, for example - who might be tempted to embezzle.