

9/24/07 - What Rev. Fay can say for himself

Editorial, Stamford Advocate

The Rev. Michael Jude Fay had nothing to say to his former parishioners in Darien after admitting in court that he stole as much as \$1 million - and maybe more - from them. That might be the first instinct of this former priest with which we can sympathize.

For what could anyone say to parishioners whose contributions to St. John Roman Catholic Church effectively ended up in their pastor's pockets?

"I'm sorry," is one sentence that comes to mind. As far as we know, Fay, whom the Diocese of Bridgeport says is no longer a practicing priest, has not apologized publicly for stealing parish funds, even though he recently pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court in New Haven to one count of interstate transportation of money obtained by fraud.

Perhaps the apology will come during sentencing, scheduled for Dec. 4. At that time, Fay faces as much as 10 years in prison and fines as high as \$250,000.

But though it would be a start, "sorry" is a woefully insufficient response to Fay's crimes. Fairfield County has been living with the specifics of this case for more than a year, when they first were reported. Yet the allegations still come as a shock.

As Fay put it in court, he used "parish funds ostensibly for things other than parish needs." He deposited parish funds into at least two bank accounts to get those "things," the U.S. Attorney's Office said. About \$230,000 was deposited into one, which attorneys said was dubbed "the Bridget fund," between 1999 and 2000. Fay used that money to pay personal expenses, according to the U.S. attorney. At least \$750,000 from the parish was deposited into a second bank account, dubbed "the Don Bosco fund," and used to pay Fay's personal credit card and other bills between 2000 and 2006. There's evidence, too, that Fay ordered a parish employee to deposit \$34,000 into his personal account to pay for the down payment on a Philadelphia condominium, among other things.

Church funds gave Fay entre to goods by Tiffany, Cartier and Hermes. Clothing by Armani. Dinners at Greenwich's Homestead Inn. "The Bridget fund?" "The Don Bosco fund?" What could Fay, who said he is undergoing treatment for prostate cancer, say in response to parishioners? To top it all off, Fay appealed to friends, including some parishioners, to help him pay his legal bills - again, without admitting culpability.

But as outrageous as the crimes were, his also is a cautionary tale about oversight and confidence.

The Diocese of Bridgeport implemented a new program of financial controls, reviews and procedures in all of its parishes as a result of what happened at St. John Church. But more aggressive oversight within the parish was called for, as well. Some church employees and members of the parish finance council raised concerns about their pastor's credit-card bills and spending, but others either were silent or did not press the issue hard enough. If they had done so, these excesses might have ended years sooner.

So much for the parish accounting issues, or at least that is the hope. But there is another matter - that of betrayal by a pastor in whom church members put their faith and trust. Once squandered, that level of confidence can be difficult to restore, if not impossible. It will be years before St. John Church, and perhaps the diocese, recovers from that loss, assuming they can do so at all.