

3-30-08 - Archdiocese: White Plains priest gambled

Jorge Fitz-Gibbon and Gary Stern, The Journal News

WHITE PLAINS - The longtime pastor of an affluent Catholic parish is under investigation for stealing "a very significant amount of church money" to feed a gambling addiction, the chancellor of the Archdiocese of New York announced at Mass yesterday.

The Rev. Patrick Dunne, who has served as pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows Church since 1991, has been permanently removed from his post and is undergoing counseling, Monsignor William Belford told parishioners.

"I've been sent to share with you what we think we know at this point about an ongoing process," he said. "What we think we know is about a gambling addiction that has been very powerful in the life of Father Patrick Dunne."

Belford said the finance office at the archdiocese first alerted him to "undocumented checks being cashed" shortly before Thanksgiving, prompting him to meet privately with Dunne.

"What he said confirmed my fears, so we immediately changed some practices here and we started a fuller investigation of our own," he said. "Unfortunately, it became clear that parish funds may have been misused, and the activity might even rise to the level of criminal behavior."

Belford said the matter was turned over to the Westchester County District Attorney's Office in early February for investigation.

A spokesman for District Attorney Janet DiFiore would neither confirm nor deny the investigation when reached Friday.

The news stunned parishioners at the Mamaroneck Avenue church, who nonetheless remained supportive of Dunne.

"Everybody deserves a second chance," said parishioner Teresa McCarty of White Plains. "We all do things we regret, and some are worse than others."

Phyl Santo, the organist at the church for the past 16 years, said that she was "shocked," and that she knew Dunne only as "a compassionate and honest man."

Parishioner Bill Finn said, "Father Dunne was always a gentleman as far as I was concerned. ... I don't know what happened."

Belford told the packed church that it was unclear how much money was unaccounted for in the church's coffers.

"We do not know the extent of what took place or how much money was misused, and we will not know that until the district attorney concludes her investigation," the monsignor said.

The well-to-do parish completed a multimillion-dollar expansion in 2006, tripling in size with a project that included a new rectory and a parish center hall.

Parishioners contributed almost \$3 million for the project, as of its completion.

When Dunne left the parish after Christmas, he said he was taking an annual vacation to Spain.

But not long after, the Rev. Angelo Micciulla, the other priest on staff, announced that Dunne was facing personal challenges and was seeking treatment.

On Feb. 24, the Rev. Philip Quealy, a veteran teacher at Archbishop Stepinac High School, was named administrator of the parish.

When asked Friday about Dunne's whereabouts, Quealy said he was told Dunne was away "for personal reasons."

Outside the church yesterday, Quealy asked a reporter to respect the parish's privacy in the matter.

Inside, Belford urged forgiveness, but made it clear that Dunne would not return as pastor.

"Realize that he's not coming back to serve at Our Lady of Sorrows," Belford said. "We told him that in December. Actions have consequences. ...

"And let no one think that he is getting off lightly. Before he recovers his peace of mind and self-esteem, he has to go through the hell of discovery in admission of what he has done."

Dunne himself had been critical of the media in the past, saying that extensive coverage of the Catholic Church's sex-abuse scandal was hurting innocent priests.

On Easter weekend in 2002, he spoke on the issue at every Mass.

"The dilemma for us is that the media is running wild with experts coming out of the walls," he said at the time. "And in the middle of it all, they're portraying all of us as some kind of defective person who couldn't function elsewhere."

But recent years have seen several cases of high-profile priests accused of stealing parish money.

The Rev. Michael Jude Fay of Darien, Conn., pleaded guilty in September of taking more than \$1 million in contributions. He is scheduled begin serving a three-year prison sentence May 19.

In 2006, Monsignor John Woolsey was sentenced to prison for stealing more than \$800,000 from his former Upper East Side parish to pay for lavish vacations, clothes and country club memberships. He was released last year.

When Woolsey pleaded guilty, the Archdiocese of New York released a statement saying:

"The Archdiocese is committed to proper stewardship of the monies entrusted to its parishes and agencies.

"Parishioners throughout the Archdiocese can be assured that an effective financial reporting system for the parishes is in place, audits are being conducted on a regular basis, and pastors are being provided ongoing training in appropriate and effective financial administration."

Right: Phyl Santo, organist at Our Lady of Sorrows, wipes away tears as Monsignor William Belford announces to parishioners that Dunne, the longtime pastor of the church, is accused of stealing money from the parish to pay gambling debts.