

January 26, 2007 - A priestly lifestyle? Father Michael's tastes included \$200K powerboat, new cars, fine dining  
By Hoa Nguyen, Staff Writer, The Stamford Advocate (CT)

The Rev. Michael Moynihan must have liked the Infiniti Q45. Since 1996, Moynihan registered six different Infinitis, trading them all in for a more recent model within a year or three of each other, tax records show. His most recent one was valued at \$32,625.

Moynihan also enjoyed boats, landing a new 35-foot Chaparral powerboat last April for \$202,000, according to the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Moynihan, who resigned this past weekend after inconsistencies were found in the parish's finances, has not been accused of stealing from the parish. An audit into his finances is still ongoing. Most parishioners said they believe Moynihan is innocent.

Even if parishioners didn't know what the former pastor of St. Michael Church owned, they could tell by the way Moynihan carried himself and talked that he had expensive tastes.

"It's obvious when he got up to preach that he didn't have a \$10 haircut," said parishioner Chris Tella of Riverside. "Some of the restaurants, places he would rave about, would be the higher-rated restaurants."

But Tella supports Moynihan, saying, "Anyone who has heard the man preach has been moved by him in a very positive way."

Moynihan, who could not be reached for comment, apparently kept two "off-the-books" accounts, one of which had about \$500,000 that is unaccounted for. Auditors are still looking at the second account.

Because Moynihan wrote parish checks out to cash or used his credit card to pay for both personal items and parish expenses, Diocese of Bridgeport officials said auditors are looking into whether church funds were used to pay for his lifestyle.

"It's one of the matters under investigation," said Norm Walker, the diocese's chief financial officer, adding that auditors knew of the luxury car. "We don't have the answer. We know that he had that and we've seen cash flows that could be related to that."

As a pastor who was ordained in 1979, Moynihan had an annual salary of between \$23,000 and \$25,000, according to the diocese.

It is possible parishioners bought him gifts, took him to dinner or gave him discounts, said Martin Maloney, a close friend of Moynihan's who served on the parish finance council and is working with the auditors.

"There are two or three (car) dealerships owned by parishioners -- maybe he got a deal," Maloney said. "He has 1,000 people out there who are of the opinion that he's their best friend."

The diocese said there are no policies restricting priests from taking gifts, and officials said they don't know whether other priests in Fairfield County own equally expensive items.

"I don't keep track or take any notice of what priests drive or if they own boats or not, so you really can't generalize," diocese spokesman Joseph McAleer said. "There is prudential judgment and you have to be mindful of your priestly vocation. You have to be mindful that you are expected to imitate Christ by leading a life of simplicity and holiness, free from extravagance and excess."

A well-to-do and now deceased relative apparently helped Moynihan purchase the luxury powerboat, a blue and white 2006 Chaparral with enough room to comfortably accommodate several passengers traveling on overnight trips, Maloney said.

"It was a relative who understood Father was a Navy chaplain," Maloney said. "He has a big love for the water."

Dinners at expensive restaurants also could be easily explained by parishioners picking up the tab. There were some instances that Moynihan would pay for the meal, but those too had reasons, Maloney said, recounting how the pastor would take some of the younger couples he was preparing for marriage out to dinner as the last part of the interview process. He would pay for the meal.

"It was a very touching thing," Maloney said. "They weren't expecting it."

In those cases, Moynihan would charge the meal to his credit card and then have the parish reimburse him for up to \$150 even though the meal for three would have likely exceeded that cost, Maloney said.

"There's no wrong here, there's no defrauding, there's no taking of money," Maloney said.

Moynihan did make bad decisions when it came to managing money, his supporters said.

"He had a history of when a bill came in, very often, the right checkbook was not always used," Maloney said, adding that he questioned the pastor about why Moynihan never told the diocese about the existence of the second account.

"He said 'I didn't think that account existed,' " Maloney said, adding that Moynihan in his mind had "deactivated" the account but never went the extra step of closing it. "When he said it escaped him, I gave him credit."

Many parishioners, such as Michael D. Grant, said they are devastated by his departure and support him, though a part of them wonders about what happened to their donations.

"When he married my daughter, I gave a contribution to the church, I just wonder," he said. "There's no way for me to know. I'd rather think positively about Michael Moynihan than negatively. I feel it's a tragic thing for him. Whatever happened there, the church can probably afford it. I just hope he does OK."

-- Staff writer Michael Dinan contributed to this story.