

June 7, 2007 - Catholic priest in pay dispute

Arundel pastor quits; officials say salary exceeded archdiocese limit

By Liz F. Kay, Baltimore Sun reporter

The pastor of a Roman Catholic parish in northern Anne Arundel County has stepped down after church officials concluded that he persuaded lay leaders to pay him more money than the Archdiocese Of Baltimore allows.

The Rev. Domenic L. Cieri, who led St. Bernadette Catholic Church in Severn for nearly 15 years, received salary and Mass stipends above the scales approved by the archdiocese, according to an audit conducted in October. Archdiocese spokesman Sean Caine said Cieri also received a housing allowance to live in northern Baltimore County, although his parish has a rectory.

"What he was receiving was an amount that was too generous and was outside the accepted policies and practices of the archdiocese," Caine said.

Known as "Father Nick" to his congregation, Cieri resigned May 29. The 54-year-old priest sent a letter to parishioners last week stating he planned to resign to take a leave of absence after discussions with laity and the archdiocesan leaders about "differences regarding fiscal policies."

More than 450 parishioners gathered in the modern sanctuary last night to hear church leaders discuss Cieri's resignation. Several speakers expressed their love and support for the priest, despite the circumstances surrounding his departure.

"I would hope at Sunday Masses from now on, we'd see a prayer for Father Nick," said Robert Rehbein of Severn.

A number of parishioners also said they believed that church leaders need to take more responsibility for overseeing the pay of priests.

"Nobody above him questioned it," said Cindy Hileman of Severn. "That's not for the laity; it's kind of a boss-colleague relationship."

St. Bernadette, which has about 1,800 families, was scheduled to undergo a routine audit, but an anonymous tipster prompted the archdiocese to look more closely at church compensation. For the fiscal year that ended last June, Cieri earned nearly \$48,000 a year, about 70 percent more than the \$28,122 that the archdiocese says he was to earn as a pastor ordained for 25 years.

In addition, Cieri received \$6,300 in Mass stipends. Priests have the choice of receiving Mass stipends for individual Masses or a lump sum of \$2,000, an amount set by the archdiocese, Caine said.

He was also reimbursed nearly \$36,000 for rectory expenses, though Caine said the priest did not live in the rectory attached to the church but rather at a house in Baldwin, in northern Baltimore County. And he received more than \$14,000 as a housing allowance, which Caine said is not normally given to priests assigned to churches with rectories.

Reached at the Baldwin home, Cieri disputed that assertion, stating that he did live at the rectory while pastor of the church. A church staff member confirmed that he spent some nights at the rectory. He is listed as one of the owners of the Baldwin home, according to state tax records.

The priest declined to comment further about the differences he referred to in his letter.

Priests assigned to special ministries, such as work in the Catholic Center, the archdiocese's headquarters in downtown Baltimore, receive housing allowances, said Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, who as eastern vicar oversees 64 parishes in Anne Arundel, Baltimore and Harford counties.

"It is most common for our priests to live very near the parish," Rozanski said. For churches without rectories, he added, "they do live in a house in the neighborhood, or right by the parish grounds."

The pastor's residence outside the parish was a problem for more than financial reasons. The church also paid a lot of money in stipends to visiting priests who celebrated some of the church's four Masses each weekend, Caine said -- even though some parishes in the archdiocese do not have resident pastors.

"Not only was the pastor being compensated unfairly -- neither was he present and addressing the pastoral needs of the parish," Caine said. "There is an expectation that a one-parish priest is going to be present on a regular basis and present in a way that the parish feels they're being cared for sacramentally and spiritually."

It is unclear how long Cieri had received the additional payments, but church documents indicate the basic pay structure dates as far back as 1998 or 1999, Caine said.

St. Bernadette's remains financially healthy. "In no time was the parish in any financial danger," Caine said. However, because the payments were approved by the parish's lay leaders, it is unlikely that the money will be recovered.

The leaders thought that because others on staff earned salaries in the \$40,000 range, it was appropriate to pay the pastor a comparable wage, Caine said. They also compared his salary to that of clergy in Protestant denominations, who may earn much more.

"In defense of the lay leadership, they were making decisions based on information that was either incomplete or unknown to them," Caine said.

The current lay leaders, known as corporators, have served since 2002. They continued a housing allowance that was in place to help the pastor build equity for his retirement.

When diocesan priests retire, they receive benefits, including pensions. After the audit discussions, the lay leaders "realized it was unnecessary and frankly they felt misled," Caine said.

Bishop Rozanski read the audit report at the end of last year. From that point on, all finances and reimbursements were brought in line with archdiocesan policy, Rozanski said.

He met with the church's two lay leaders several times during the spring. Afterward, Cieri decided to resign and take a leave of absence.

"It was clear that we weren't going to resolve the disagreement that we had over fiscal policies," Rozanski said.

During his leave of absence, Cieri remains a priest but cannot function as one, Caine said.

The bishop of each diocese sets salary scales for priests, in consultation with his diocesan advisors and priests' council, Rozanski said.

A new pastor has not been appointed. Ann McDonald, a longtime lay pastoral associate there, will continue to serve the congregation, Rozanski said.

A lay corporation oversees each parish, the bishop said. Baltimore's archbishop, Cardinal William H. Keeler, is the corporation's president, Rozanski, its vice president, the pastor its secretary and two lay corporators who are nominated by the pastor and appointed by the archbishop.

Lay corporators are trained at regional and parish meetings and can refer to a handbook, Rozanski said.

Now, the archdiocese will send the guidelines for priests' salaries directly to each parish's corporators and the finance committees, Rozanski said. They have also refined audit procedures.

"All this comes down to one basic issue," said Charles Zech, professor of at Villanova University.

Canon law, which governs the Catholic Church, requires congregations to have a finance council.

"In many parishes, the pastor take it seriously and they do a good job," Zech said. "In some parishes, it's the pastor's rubber-stamp board."

Though training differs by diocese, most do not do much training for finance councils, the professor said -- assuming the pastor will appoint experienced people.

"There's a real temptation for these folks to have some sympathy with their religious leaders," Zech said. "Their pastor lives a life of poverty by choice."

Unlike members of some religious orders, diocesan priests do not take vows of poverty, he said. However, "there's an understanding of what a priest's lifestyle is like. This violates that in my mind," Zech said.

Transparency in financial reporting is the way to prevent problems such as these, he said.

"If the parishioners weren't aware of this the finance council fell down on its responsibility to be transparent and accountable," he said. "They should be aware of everything."

Arnie Thomas, one of the lay corporators, said last night that he and the other corporator thought that they had discretion to set salary, and that they were fairly compensating their priest.

"The more we learned," he added, "the more we felt we had been manipulated by Father Nick."

Several parish members said they thought the archdiocese was at fault.

"The crux of the problem is money," said Ron Wells, a parish member for 40 years. "The archdiocese believes pastors are due the equivalent of minimum wage. I think they deserve more than that."

"The diocese must do a better job of laying out what are acceptable expenditures," he added.

In December, the archdiocese set up EthicsPoint, a mechanism for anyone to anonymously report financial or human resource irregularities through the archdiocese Web site, www.ethicspoint.com or via a toll-free hot line, 888-572-8026.