

January 26, 2007 - Keeping an Eye on the Collection Plate

The Wall Street Journal, HOUSES OF WORSHIP, By DAVID GIBSON

This month marks five years since the curtain went up on what would become a national drama over the sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy. Since then, the episcopacy has taken many praiseworthy steps toward making Catholic parishes the safe havens for children that they should have been all along.

But while the focus on child welfare is primary, there is also a secondary scandal that continues to afflict the church -- this one the scandal of financial malfeasance. Almost every day, it seems, stories emerge of priests who have pilfered from the collection plate, usually to finance a lifestyle not quite in keeping with what is expected of a faithful Catholic. Just this week, the Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn., announced that the pastor of a Greenwich, Conn., parish was being removed over the disappearance of some \$500,000 in donations. That follows the revelations last year that a prominent Darien, Conn., priest, Michael Jude Fay, had walked off with \$1.4 million to bankroll a luxe lifestyle of New York trips and Florida vacations with a male friend.

The examples are hardly confined to one diocese. Earlier this month it was a pastor in Virginia stealing \$600,000 to help support a woman who may be his wife, while last September two Palm Beach, Fla., priests were arrested for allegedly stealing a whopping \$8.6 million from their parish. In a new survey by the Center for the Study of Church Management at Villanova's School of Business, 85% of U.S. dioceses responding said that they had uncovered embezzlement schemes over the past five years. More than 10% reported that the amounts stolen exceeded half a million dollars.

The dangers in such a drumbeat of stories are similar to those that attended the sexual-abuse scandal: the impression that all priests are prone to theft (celibacy was blamed for the abuse of children -- will the vow of poverty be attached to embezzlement?); the claim that the Catholic Church is uniquely prone to such crimes and the sense that it is not doing enough to address them.

In reality, of course, embezzlement is hardly a common sin among clerics -- and laypeople can succumb just as readily. Yet the problem can seem widespread in the Catholic Church simply because of its size. With nearly 70 million followers, Catholicism is the largest denomination in the U.S. by far, with believers dropping nearly \$6 billion a year into church coffers. Thieves often get caught eventually, since Catholic parishes and dioceses do have accounting systems, however poorly they may function. Less centralized religious bodies can operate with less oversight; and the thievery they do catch generally does not become, in the press, part of a collective tally.

More important, the Catholic Church has begun the long slog toward fiscal accountability. But the initiative has not come from the top down. Instead, much of the momentum came from grass-roots groups like Voice of the Faithful, which began in reaction to the sex abuse scandal, while the know-how has come from universities like Villanova, whose church management program conducted the embezzlement study.

Similarly, Boston College is launching the first-ever graduate program to train priests and Church personnel in management. And Geoffrey T. Boisi, a philanthropist and retired vice chairman of JPMorgan Chase, has been the driving force behind the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, an organization of prominent Catholics seeking to improve diocesan administration.

Just as important, many bishops have embraced the cause of fiscal accountability by pressing -- albeit belatedly -- for oversight. Last week, a group of lay experts who advise the American hierarchy called for tighter internal controls over finances in the nation's more than 19,000 parishes. And the treasurer of the bishops' conference, Bishop Dennis M. Schnurr of Duluth, Minn., called the recommendations "reasonable and helpful" -- though he expressed doubts about using seminary time to train would-be priests in finance.

Much remains to be done, at all levels. Finance councils are the only parish organizations mandated by canon law. Yet one expert recently estimated that one-third of U.S. parishes may have no oversight at the source, and many councils probably exist only on paper. Far too many dioceses do not release annual financial statements, and too often the information provided is indecipherable even to an accountant.

Moreover, too many bishops are dragging their feet, for a variety of reasons. For instance, in a churlish essay in a recent edition of the Jesuit weekly *America*, Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Curry tried to argue that there is really no organizational crisis in the church, and he ascribed an anti-Catholic bias to Catholic writers who demand nuts-and-bolts reforms to help restore confidence in the church and its leadership. It is "religious renewal," not "organizational tinkering," that will save the church, Bishop Curry wrote.

He was sharply refuted, with one author noting that Bishop Curry was setting up a false dichotomy of "either improving management or strengthening evangelization." Certainly, no one thinks that greater transparency and accountability in governance will erase original sin, much less end pilfering. Churches are a cash-and-carry business, and the most effective tool against common theft (as opposed to an accounting scam) may be the use of checks and credit cards by worshipers. But financial reform, if it is undertaken seriously, presents one of the greatest opportunities for the bishops to restore trust in the church.

Mr. Gibson is the author of "The Rule of Benedict: Pope Benedict XVI and His Battle With the Modern World" (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).