

January 28, 2007 - Fallout from another parish finance case

The Stamford Advocate (CT), editorial

For all anyone knows, the Rev. Michael Moynihan ultimately will be remembered as a wonderful spiritual leader and a sloppy bookkeeper. But he certainly is raising issues for the Catholic Church and the community today.

Rev. Moynihan was asked to resign from St. Michael the Archangel Roman Catholic Church in Greenwich for failing to address questionable bookkeeping practices first raised in 2004 by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport. Two "off-the-books" bank accounts not reported to the diocese have been discovered. One had \$500,000 that has not yet been accounted for. The investigation is continuing.

Rev. Moynihan has not been accused of any crime. Parishioners of St. Michael's are rising to his defense with newspaper advertisements and testimonials about his attentiveness and generosity. Rev. Moynihan is St. Michael's Church in their eyes. He is the reason they worship there.

But the diocese has to investigate, given last year's spectacular scandal at St. John Roman Catholic Church in Darien, where former Pastor Michael Jude Fay is accused of misappropriating \$1.4 million in funds over six years. That caused the diocese to accelerate plans to conduct external audits and tighten financial controls at its parishes.

One of those audits brought the diocese to the doors of St. Michael, Greenwich's wealthiest parish. But this investigation is raising concerns that could go beyond the black-and-white of spending - to what sort of gifts priests ought to accept and the role that parish councils and other laity ought to play in overseeing finance and expenditures.

Rev. Moynihan drove an expensive automobile. Infiniti was his make. A former Navy chaplain, he had a 35-foot powerboat valued in April at more than \$200,000. He seemed to know about fine restaurants.

No one is saying that Rev. Moynihan, who had an annual salary of between \$23,000 and \$25,000, according to the diocese, paid for these luxuries with parish funds. Parishioners could have treated him to fancy dinners. A friend who serves on the parish council said it is possible Rev. Moynihan got automobiles for free or at a reduced rate from a parishioner who worked in a dealership. A deceased relative reportedly helped him purchase the boat.

But that raises questions about what qualifies as a priestly existence, and whether it ought to be different for priests in wealthy and poor communities. The Bridgeport diocese has a full range of these.

This really is a matter for the diocese and local Catholics. While the diocese does not keep track of gifts, a spokesman said priests are "expected to imitate Christ by leading a life of simplicity and holiness, free from extravagance and excess."

We don't know how clear this has been made to priests over the years, or how common lavish gift-giving to priests is throughout our area.

More to the point: Does "excess" vary by geography?

Maybe so. Perhaps a priest in a wealthy neighborhood, in Greenwich or elsewhere, ought to be expected to live like his flock, even if that means dining on haute cuisine and driving a \$32,000 automobile. A number of parishioners are not surprised at the existence of off-the-books accounts: They say they give with the expressed condition that donations be used for the needy or for their parish, and not sent to the diocese to pay lawyers and settlements of sex abuse cases. The diocese has other ideas. The pastor is held accountable by the bishop for ensuring that parish finances are in order and flow to the diocese.

The choir of those calling for substantive change in church governance is growing. In Wednesday's Advocate, Tom Gallagher of Greenwich's Riverside section suggested that some of this authority be dispersed, with parish boards assuming greater oversight for parish planning, finance and budgeting. That seems worthy of consideration, as long as parish boards take those responsibilities seriously.

In the meantime, the investigations and audits are expected to continue.