

Last Saturday (January 20) the Post praised the “greening” of Catholic schools of the Diocese of Bridgeport for following the lead of Deirdre Imus, wife of radio entertainer and sometime local resident, Don Imus. I join you in a “thumbs up” salute towards a healthier environment for students and teachers.

However, by Monday the Post reported yet another story linking the Diocese of Bridgeport to a different “green issue”. Bishop Lori moved once again to remove a pastor, this time in Greenwich, because of mishandling of parish funds.

It appeared that recommendations from a 2004 audit were neither followed by the pastor nor followed up by the Diocese. By week’s end media reports included ownership of a series of fancy cars and a \$200,000 boat by the priest and unaccounted parish funds running to \$500,000 or more.

Bishop Lori concluded that the pastor could not “lead the parish to a new day of financial transparency and accountability.”

Echoes of the scandal last spring caused by the activities of Father Fay, former pastor of St. John’s in Darien come to mind. In that case Bishop Lori called for an initial audit of recent parish financial records. This revealed \$1.4 million of mishandled or unaccounted funds. While the descriptive word ‘embezzlement’ appeared in most press accounts, the bishop curiously used the alternative term, ‘extravagant’. Who stands as complainant to expedite legal action on this gross misappropriation of Church funds?

In between these two scandals, on August 1, 2006 the Diocese sold three nursing facilities it operated in Danbury, Stamford and Trumbull. As part of the deal the Diocese retained the land, subject to a 99 year lease and a widely publicized Covenant of Catholicity. The financial price or value received by the Diocese was not made public. Yet six weeks later the ‘nursing home deal’ was re-sold for an announced price of \$345 million. This newest nursing home purchaser has a blemished operating record in Connecticut and is awaiting a license from the State. What’s the full story, Bishop Lori?

These events, as well as others, cause reasonable questions about the handling of financial affairs in Catholic parishes and institutions of this diocese. It seems clear in the news accounts that laypersons were not involved in a respected stewardship capacity on parish councils as Church law sets out. At this time numerous parishes in the Diocese operate in this fashion with no systematic formal procedure for budget formation, regular financial review or comprehensive public reporting to their community members. The Diocese has not seemed to care about this in any practical or specific fashion until a scandal occurs. While the Bishop frequently refers to his appointed financial advisors, there is no readily available listing of these people, presumably experienced and drawn from the field of financial and corporate management. Accountability would certainly be improved if the names of these women and men were promoted in each parish as publicly as the Bishop’s Appeal layperson leadership.

On Friday, January 26 the CT Post reported another embezzlement story. The 34 year old treasurer of an NBC company in New York, by setting up unauthorized accounts and funding them in April 2006 and January 2007 embezzled \$800,000. In this case indictments were issued on January 25, 2007 in U.S. District Court. Since the Bishop is frequently pictured with executives of GE and NBC, he might

use the next 'photo-op' as an 'info-op'. Bishop Lori might turn to them, ask and then listen to why and how they promptly prosecute financial mismanagement.

In the interest of a "greener" environment in the Diocese in the future, each of us must:

- Remember that it is hard to expect Father to "know best" about financial administration when his seminary formation provides no training, his personal salary barely exceeds the new minimum hourly wage limits for the many hours served each week and his pension is ever at risk by action of the Bishop.
- Encourage the Bishop to provide more contemporaneous accountability in all things financial, both policy and practice, or suffer future difficulty in fund raising appeals.
- Read, understand, discuss, and question if necessary the currently available annual Diocesan financial reports in a spirit of adult Christian responsibility.
- Volunteer in his or her Church community for a term on a functioning parish council or financial committee to encourage the practice of open, accountable and transparent behavior.

In the words of a recent Pope, "If you would have peace, work for justice."

John Marshall Lee  
Bridgeport