

February 15, 2007 - **Priest to plead guilty to theft**
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OMAHA, Neb. (AP) -- A Catholic priest will plead guilty to felony theft by deception for embezzling more than \$100,000 from his parish, his lawyer said Monday.

The Rev. Stephen J. Gutgsell turned himself into police Monday as part of a deal reached with prosecutors, said Jim Schaefer, Gutgsell's lawyer. He was released on 10 percent of a \$10,000 bail, Schaefer said.

Schaefer said the plea could come this week but more likely the week of Feb. 23.

The Class III felony carries a maximum prison sentence of 20 years and a \$25,000 fine, Schaefer said.

The Omaha Archdiocese said an internal investigation last month showed Gutgsell took the money from St. Patrick's Parish in south Omaha, where he was pastor. The missing funds became known after a financial review by parishioners.

Schaefer said that Gutgsell reported his actions to the diocese before the missing funds were discovered.

"A lot of credit card debt," Schaefer said when asked why Gutgsell took the money. "It wasn't gambling, it wasn't anything at all like that. The interest got him -- credit cards -- and that was it."

The archdiocese has turned the investigation over to police, said the Rev. Ryan Lewis, vice chancellor of the archdiocese.

"Our focus continues to be full restoration of the money to the missing parish," Lewis said Monday.

Friends and family of Gutgsell came forward to help him pay back the church, and a restitution fund was set up, Schaefer said.

Schaefer said the bulk of those funds would come from Schaefer's assets, including money he had set aside for retirement. Schaefer said Gutgsell would be able to pay back most of the money by the time he's sentenced.

Gutgsell, who had been at St. Patrick's since 2001, quit his post, was placed on administrative leave and moved from parish facilities, the archdiocese announced in early February.

Diocese officials said Gutgsell had been cooperating with the investigation and there were no signs anyone else was involved.

Gutgsell is the brother of the Rev. Michael Gutgsell, pastor of St. Cecilia Cathedral in Omaha.
