

June 1, 2007 – Diocese leaves many questions unanswered in Darien matter

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Last week, the Connecticut Post and the Darien Times detailed the latest chapter in the saga of Father Michael Jude Fay, former 15-year pastor of St. John Parish in Darien. Fay left town in 2006 amid a flurry of news articles detailing mishandled funds, responsible "whistleblowers" who attempted to attract prompt attention and a federal investigation. Subsequently, diocesan auditors revealed a tale of financial mismanagement and secret accounts, resignations and parishioner emotions.

Many questions remain unanswered without a response from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport. If you are a cradle Catholic, you doubtless are familiar with capital campaigns for a new church, bingos and raffles for parochial schools, collections and benefits for the missions or ministries, and appeals of all kinds including an Annual Bishop's Appeal.

But Fay's recent letter appealing for financial help to assist him in settling his legal expenses was something entirely new. This was probably the first time in the history of the Diocese of Bridgeport that a priest of the diocese made a "legal appeal" request. It was designed to be a narrow collection, for the remainder of his personally acknowledged legal expenses. No advice was indicated as to donor tax deductibility.

One year later many Catholics (and probably others) are confused. With so much apparent evidence of financial mismanagement and personal enrichment by Fay, why are there as yet no criminal charges filed?

The federal criminal investigation is stated as ongoing. Some have wondered whether the lack of progress or reporting is because there is no complaining party with "standing." Perhaps there will never be charges, a trial or punishment through the legal process.

The thinking is that Fay did not take the money from the people of the parish. It was not theirs. For when they dropped their offering in the basket, they lost any say about where it went and on what it was spent. It really became the bishop's money at that moment of giving, because of the operation of Connecticut statutes and church Canon Law.

So, the press reported embezzlement and the diocese referred to extravagance. There is a world of difference between those viewpoints.

Fay, as an incardinated priest of the Diocese of Bridgeport, owed at least obedience and service to his bishop through responsible leadership of his parish community. The bishop owed his brother priest support. Though Fay's lifestyle concept exceeded the bishop's viewpoint by at least 800 percent over the five years since Bishop William E. Lori came to the diocese, the audit did not probe any further into history. Some funds were recovered.

But the Diocese of Bridgeport in its recent financial education series in Fairfield County Catholic, the diocesan newspaper, has not made clear what support level in terms of compensation, benefits, housing, retirement, etc. coincides with a simple priestly life here in Fairfield County as contrasted with one that is extravagant.

Fay wrote from Florida to family and friends that "this past year has been complicated and extremely painful." One can believe the truth of this statement, since his opportunity for securing income was severely reduced. Does Bishop Lori continue to supply a salary? Or medical benefits? The press mentions none of these. Fairfield County Catholic, which has been prompt in the past to note many financial and administrative changes in the diocese, has provided no information toward this end either. Would a better informed Catholic in the pew feel inclined to be more supportive?

Fay goes on to say, "As proceedings come to a conclusion, I am left with a very difficult legal bill," reportedly of \$115,000. Do you wonder at this amount or why Fay retained legal counsel? There have been no charges. Perhaps there have been negotiations with the diocese. Perhaps there have been several hundred hours of

representation. If Fay has personal legal expenses of \$115,000, do you wonder what the legal, accounting and auditing expenses have been for the diocese on the occasion of the St. John embarrassment?

And that thought leads me to understand that I was wrong in my earlier statement that this was the first clergy "legal expense" appeal letter. You see, the bishop, through his ownership and control of the diocese and each of its 87 parishes, continues with money given by the people in the pews to fund " a legal appeal" against release of documents, including statements by Bishop Edward Egan (and others) relating to the scandal of sexual abuse. Several news organizations have petitioned the courts for years now to have those files unsealed.

As church members, we have unknowingly paid for this entire story through the years in many ways. We have paid for insurance premiums that funded settlements. Surplus assets, donated by generations of the faithful, have been sold. Isn't it time for Bishop Lori to cease this expensive defense and let the records indicating Bishop Egan's activities in managing the sexual abusers among his priests be unsealed? Isn't it time for priests of integrity and Bishop Lori, who was not here when the court records were drawn up and sealed, to be able to raise their heads in the court of community opinion? If the abuse scandal is truly over, Bishop Lori, can't the entire story become public now?

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