

Worshippers unveil financial fracas

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Parishioners at St. Patrick Catholic Church tried for more than a year in the early 1990s to get diocesan officials to investigate the Rev. Francis Benedict Guinan's management of parish finances, according to correspondence released to The Palm Beach Post. Viewed as a whole, the correspondence paints a portrait of a parish torn by rumor and suspicion.

Ultimately, then-Bishop Keith Symons and his financial officer backed Guinan and told the parishioners to drop the matter.

In 2003, Guinan was transferred from the Palm Beach Gardens church to St. Vincent Ferrer parish in Delray Beach, where he succeeded his close friend, the Rev. John Skehan, as pastor.

Last week, authorities charged Skehan and Guinan with misappropriating nearly \$8.6 million from St. Vincent coffers and spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on travel, gambling, rare coins and girlfriends. Both men are charged with grand theft. Skehan, St. Vincent's pastor for 40 years, has been released on \$40,000 bond; authorities are negotiating Guinan's return to Florida after he completes a vacation to Australia.

After learning of the charges, a group of St. Patrick parishioners gave The Post more than 100 pages of their correspondence with Guinan and diocesan officials, along with meeting notes and financial documents. They said they broke their long-standing decision not to go public and offered the materials in an effort to show that diocesan officials knew of their suspicions about Guinan, but still chose him in 2003 to run St. Vincent Ferrer, one of the most prominent churches in the five-county diocese.

After Symons rejected their claims, the unhappy parishioners wrote to the Apostolic Nunciature, the diplomatic arm of the Vatican, and the Internal Revenue Service, but heard of no investigation by either. After 1995, they stopped writing letters to the diocese. They never contacted secular authorities.

On Saturday, two days after the scandal broke, St. Patrick's current pastor, the Rev. Brian Flanagan, said parish finances were "a mess" when he replaced Guinan. He said he installed financial controls and promised his congregation a written report.

Asked to comment for this story, Flanagan referred a reporter to the diocese. A spokeswoman declined to comment on any events during the past five years, which she said are under investigation.

From the correspondence, Guinan emerges as an autocrat who ridiculed his critics and banned them from the parish.

Some parishioners found Guinan's behavior bizarre and inappropriate, with his focus increasingly on money. Guinan suggested in a pastoral letter that parishioners could "dedicate" the sanctuary light to a loved one for \$10 a week. Parishioners objected to his conducting a building fund meeting on Good Friday, one of the most sacred days of the Catholic year, and going to a racetrack instead of distributing ashes on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent.

When parishioners brought him their concerns, he dismissed them as "cranks."

"He felt we had no right to question anything," said the parishioner who provided the correspondence on the condition that none of the names of parishioners involved be printed.

Asked about the alleged financial irregularities, diocesan spokeswoman Alexis Walkenstein wrote in an e-mail: "There is a record of complaints from parishioners about Father Frank Guinan during the 1992-94 time period. Despite the fact that the allegations of financial impropriety lacked actionable evidence, these complaints were turned over to prior administration, in this case Father Murphy."

An internal audit showed "nothing out of the ordinary," she wrote.

St. Patrick opened in 1987, with Guinan as its priest, in a spirit of camaraderie and optimism. It grew quickly from about 250 worshippers to 1,500 in 1991, when the parish began a campaign to build itself a church near Palm Beach Gardens.

It was at this time that parishioners began to question Guinan's use of their money.

Suspicious parishioners began to investigate parish finances in 1992. They found Guinan had bought several pieces of property under his own name and in the name of SHAG, a for-profit, investment company he formed in 1984 with Skehan and another priest, Michael Hickey, state records show.

Federal bankruptcy documents provided by the parishioner showed Guinan invested \$85,000 with Palm Beach Gardens mortgage broker William Cartwright, a member of St. Patrick parish. SHAG invested \$90,000. Cartwright declared bankruptcy in 1991 and went to jail in 1993 for defrauding investors of \$2 million.

Other financial records parishioners were able to collect suggested missing collection money and other discrepancies in the parish's books, including the church building fund, all of which they contend amounted to several hundred thousand dollars. When they presented their concerns to Guinan, he refused to answer their questions.

His unwillingness to address financial concerns at St. Patrick was to be repeated in 2003, when, as the new pastor of St. Vincent, he stalled a diocesan-ordered audit of the parish for eight months, police records show. Soon after Guinan arrived at St. Vincent, Skehan told a church employee that Guinan had stolen from St. Patrick parish, according to the police report.

Sal Gintoli, another of the original parish members, said in an interview that he was troubled by the cost of the church building, which escalated from \$2 million to \$3 million to \$7 million. He left St. Patrick in July.

"He turned off a lot of people," Gintoli said. "Sooner or later he had to get caught. There were rumors all over the place. The fact that there was no oversight surprised the hell out of me. Seems to me the bishop's office should have had some control."

After a year of no cooperation from Guinan, several parishioners took their complaints to Bishop Symons in 1994. The bishop spent two hours listening to two parishioners in his office.

In June of that year, 18 parishioners sent a petition to the bishop, asking for an audit. They noted that six months of 1991 financial information was missing and that \$200,000 collected for the building fund was not recorded.

Guinan was furious. In a letter to Symons, a parishioner recounted a tempestuous meeting, during which Guinan said, "Well, you had your fun and stabbed me in the back," to which the parishioner retorted, "I came to you first."

The meeting ended when Guinan dismissed the parishioners, telling them that they were "no longer in the parish."

After receiving the petition, Symons assigned the Rev. Richard Murphy, diocesan vicar for pastoral services, to conduct an audit. Eight days after receiving the petition, Murphy wrote the parishioners.

"There is no evidence of any errors or wrongdoings," Murphy wrote without any details of the audit.

Murphy, who could not be reached for comment this week, also issued a warning:

"I would suggest that this investigation should finalize the concerns and accusations of a small number of parishioners. If it continues, it becomes apparent that this is a witch hunt against Father Guinan which brings us to a very serious situation of the defamation of a person's character.... I have known Father Guinan for about 30 years and he has always been a man of the utmost integrity - an opinion shared by the Bishop and priests of the Diocese and the vast majority of parishioners in any parish where he has served."

In October 1994, hearing that Symons would be visiting St. Patrick, a parishioner wrote Symons, making one last attempt to clear the air in the troubled parish.

"I hope that your plans include an open forum where the parishioners of St. Patrick have an opportunity to seek answers, from both you and the pastor.... We feel that reconciliation begins with honesty and truths, don't you agree?"

Symons wrote back, advising them to "reflect on our blessings, of which there are many." His letter made no mention of the request for a forum.

St. Patrick parish divided along lines of those who believed Guinan and those who thought he was misusing the parish's

money.

Guinan's supporters saw the dissident group as building a dossier on an innocent priest, rumor mongering and troublemaking.

When a disgraced Symons left his post in 1998 amid allegations of inappropriate behavior with boys earlier in his career, one of the parishioners wrote one last letter.

"We sincerely hope that you were not compromised in your decision to overlook the serious problems at St. Patrick by any individual or group," the parishioner wrote. "But, that aside, we want to express to you our sincere sorrow for the situation in which you now find yourself."

The parishioner was broken-hearted to leave St. Patrick and has never entered the new church building.

"I don't go to church anymore, but I still have my faith. My mother always said that God is the last judge."
