

Pastor Charged With Stealing 'Winnings' of Fake Raffles

By NATE SCHWEBER

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WASHINGTON TOWNSHIP, N.J., Sept. 21 — Each year, the Rev. Robert Ascolese, a well-liked pastor in this town of 6,400, ran a “power ball” raffle, selling \$100 tickets to raise money for a new building for St. Joseph Catholic Academy. Half the proceeds were to go to the school, and half to the lucky ticket holder.

But the authorities say the only winner was Father Ascolese, who stands accused of stealing more than \$600,000 from his church and several charities. The pastor, known as Father Bob here amid the cornfields, stood handcuffed in front of a judge on Thursday in the Warren County courthouse, pleaded not guilty and was released on \$75,000 bail.

A 32-count indictment charges that Father Ascolese, 45, who came here in 1999 to start the academy, wrote checks — including one for \$100,000 — to fake people or to real ones who had never heard of the lottery, and then diverted the money to himself.

From 2001 to 2005, the indictment says, the church sold more than 4,000 tickets but no one ever collected a prize. The school, which was holding classes on church grounds while awaiting the new building, closed in May because of a lack of funds.

Marianne Van Deursen, the mayor of Washington Township, had a son enrolled in the school and said she bought four lottery tickets each year to support it. She said she, her family and fellow parish members felt “betrayed and disheartened” upon learning of the allegations. “Nobody wants to believe a man of the cloth could possibly have scammed us,” she said.

In a statement, Father Ascolese said, “The funds in question were always utilized for the parish, the parish school, the parish day care center and parish youth.”

Besides the fake raffle, Father Ascolese is also accused of stealing from Catholic Charities by reporting false church donations to homeless people, which were then reimbursed by the social services agency. He faces multiple counts of theft, forgery, tampering with public records, conspiracy and theft by deception. Some of the charges carry prison terms of up to 10 years.

The authorities also accuse Father Ascolese of teaming with William and Stella Quilban, a couple from neighboring Hunterdon County who worked at Merck & Company, to steal money from the company through bogus claims that the Quilbans had made matching donations to its charity, a fraud the pastor is also charged with perpetrating on Johnson & Johnson. The Quilbans pleaded not guilty on Thursday and were released on \$35,000 bail.

Father Ascolese has been on a leave of absence from the church since October, when staff members reported suspicions of theft to the diocese, which contacted prosecutors. He has been staying at Emmaus House in Perth Amboy, where he served his first eight years of the priesthood, but has not been working.

James Nolan, Father Ascolese’s lawyer and longtime friend, described him as well educated, sincere and generous, “kind of what you would hope to expect from a priest.” He said his client “did not steal \$600,000.”

Walking out of the courthouse, Father Ascolese was asked if, when he drew a raffle ticket, the winner was a real person.

“Usually, yes,” he answered.