

2-6-07 - Priests remain parishes fiscal agents

TIMES-DISPATCH (VA), by KIRAN KRISHNAMURTHY

The Catholic Diocese of Richmond may change little about its financial practices, at least immediately, in the wake of embezzlement scandals at three churches.

The diocese is recommending to parishes that contributions be counted by two unrelated parishioners, a guideline officials hope can help prevent a theft from the collection plate, as an employee of St. Peter Catholic Church in Richmond is accused of doing last year.

However, the diocese will likely still empower priests alone to open bank accounts for parishes, diocesan spokesman Steve Neill said yesterday. That is how, police say, the Rev. Rodney L. Rodis allegedly embezzled as much as \$1 million from two Louisa County parishes. "That's still going to stand. That is not going to change," Neill said.

Neill said the letter that a priest receives from the bishop naming the pastor as fiscal agent for a particular parish is rooted in canon, or church, law. Diocesan officials cited a section of canon law that says the pastor is the representative of the parish and is responsible for administering the goods of the parish.

The Rev. Ladislav Orsy, an expert in canon law at Georgetown University, said he knows of nothing in church law that would prohibit the diocese from requiring multiple signatures to open a bank account.

"The diocese is perfectly entitled to say one signature or two signatures or three signatures," Orsy said. "It is the duty of the diocese to set up a system that includes accountability. There is no reason why the diocese cannot set up checks and balances."

In Protestant churches, finances are typically handled by a committee or trustees.

Neill, who is also editor of The Catholic Virginian, said the diocese still plans to review its financial practices and could complete an update of its 10-year-old guidelines this spring.

Margaret Horvath, a former member of the parish finance council at St. Edward Catholic Church in Chesterfield County, said the diocese has an obligation to parishioners to ensure contributions are reaching their intended destinations and being used according to donors' wishes, if any are specified.

"We cannot always assume that everyone giving to the church is giving out of their excess. People live on fixed incomes. They have medical bills. Life is expensive," she said.

Neill, when asked what assurances the diocese can offer parishioners, suggested parishioners keep copies of canceled checks and make sure they get a record of their contributions at the end of each year.

John Clickener, a Catholic and former bank executive in Tappahannock who is critical of the diocese's financial practices, said asking people to trust the church or keep more careful records themselves might not cut it with some Catholics.

"I don't think rejecting better controls is going to meet the expectations of the faithful," he said, adding he fears parishes might suffer if parishioners choose to give to other organizations instead.

In Louisa, the felony embezzlement case against Rodis, 50, originated in November when diocesan officials found a Pennsylvania donor's check was deposited in a bank account church officials knew nothing about. Investigators say Rodis deposited donations in the account in a Fredericksburg bank and then used the money for other purposes.

Rodis, who has lived in neighboring Spotsylvania County for a decade with three children and a woman he told neighbors was his wife, is due back in court Feb. 26.

In Richmond, Bernadine Brown, 60, is charged with felony embezzlement. Prosecutors say she stole at least \$500 last spring from St. Peter Church, located near Capitol Square. She was suspended from her job in July and left the position in November after nearly two decades at the church. She was arrested Oct. 30 and is scheduled for a preliminary hearing March 9.

Clickener said he was distraught to read that neither the diocese nor officials at St. Peter spoke directly to the congregation as a whole about the Richmond case for months, until it was publicized in The Times-Dispatch.

"There's this effort to keep it quiet. This is the pedophile scandal all over again," he said.

Neill said whatever the financial system, the issue ultimately comes down to trust.

"You just have to trust people," he said, "and Christians are not going to give up their sense of trust."

Horvath sees it a little differently. "It is incumbent on us to set in place policies and procedures to keep people honest. We need to clean up our act," she said.