

Priest Admits Hiring P.I.

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DARIEN -- Parishioners at St. John Roman Catholic Church came out in force yesterday to support a beloved parish priest after he admitted he helped hire a private eye to find out why the church -- in one of the wealthiest towns in the country -- was losing money.

The admission came after the parish's pastor, the Rev. Michael Jude Fay, resigned amid accusations he stole from the church to support his lavish lifestyle with his boyfriend. The investigator said Fay spent at least \$200,000 in church funds for limousine rides, fancy dinners, trips and gifts.

No one knew who hired the investigator, Vito Colucci Jr. of Stamford, until yesterday, when the Rev. Michael Madden, parochial vicar at the parish, told worshippers at the 8 a.m. Mass that he and the church bookkeeper, Bethany Derario, were behind it.

A day earlier, while being interviewed by auditors hired by the Diocese of Bridgeport, Derario admitted she helped pay for the private investigator, said her attorney, Michael Sherman of Stamford. A woman who attended the 8 a.m. Mass said Madden told parishioners that the past four years were "hell" for him and Derario, and he knew the diocese was angry with them for hiring the investigator.

He told parishioners that the church's finance committee was "asleep at the switch," and he was upset that the diocese didn't help even though there were "red flags," the woman said.

"He said he couldn't stand at the altar and look us in the face any more, knowing what was going on. Everyone stood up and applauded," she said. "He said he didn't know what was going to happen to him."

After the morning Mass, word quickly spread that Bishop William Lori was on his way to meet with the parish council and finance committee. Dozens of parishioners gathered at the Post Road church to support Madden. They became unruly at times, telling Lori that Madden acted out of love and should not be punished for blowing the whistle on his boss.

"Thank God he did what he did," said Cyndy Ashburne, an upset parishioner who was there to greet the bishop. "I heard it was a parish council meeting, but I said, 'I'll be damned, I'm a parishioner. I put my money in the box. I'm going.' "

Katrina O'Connor, a parishioner of six years, said she doubts the diocese would have investigated Fay's spending if Madden hadn't looked into it first.

"He took matters into his own hands, which is really brave, and we are grateful to him," she said.

Brian Fogarty, a former member of the parish youth group, carried a hand-drawn sign that read, "Out with Fay; Father Mike can stay."

"All that we can pray for is that everyone accused of wrongdoing is held accountable and that Father Mike can stay," said Fogarty, 22. "You shouldn't get rid of the one person who stood up."

Lori clearly was unhappy with Madden for hiring Colucci before the church completed its investigation, but the bishop did not ask for Madden's resignation.

Madden said yesterday he asked to be released from his administrative duties, which he was given after Fay's resignation last week. Lori gave Madden two options -- he could remain as parochial vicar while a new pastor is named, then take time for "rest and reflection;" or he could immediately take "a period of rest and reflection." Madden chose to remain.

Monsignor William Scheyd, pastor of St. Aloysius Church in New Canaan and vicar general of the diocese, will oversee St. John's until a new pastor is named.

For about an hour starting at 6:30 p.m. yesterday, Lori met with nearly 200 emotional parishioners at the parish center. The crowd became combative at times, shouting at the bishop and blaming him for not ending Fay's tenure sooner.

They asked how Lori could say Madden's announcement at the Mass "worsened" the situation with Fay.

"I did not think it was the right thing to bring this thing to a private investigator, who unceremoniously brought it to the media before we had a chance to investigate," Lori said. ". . . We are not a corporation, we are not a government agency, we are a church community and it's best we come together to decide how to handle the difficulties."

The crowd wanted to know why Lori did not remove Fay when he became aware of problems with church finances last fall.

"We do not ask a pastor to step aside when we audit his parish," Lori said, explaining it's not uncommon for the diocese to look at a parish's books. "When we began, we had no reason to believe there was wrongdoing. We thought, perhaps, there was mismanagement."

When he realized something more was going on, he asked for Fay's resignation, Lori said.

Parishioners kept pressing him to say when he learned that Fay was stealing, but Lori was vague, saying it was sometime this spring. The bishop said he will report back to the parish in detail when the diocese's investigation is complete.

Madden apologized to the crowd for complicating the situation. He asked them to calm down and be nicer to the bishop, saying it's not the bishop's fault Fay took their money.

"He's been very kind to me in light of my transgressions," Madden said.

The crowd booed and one woman yelled, "He covered it up."

Madden said he doesn't want to be pastor.

"Even if Bishop Lori offered me the job as pastor, I don't feel quite ready to assume that," he said. "I'm busy enough as an associate here."

Madden's remarks in the evening and an apology letter he wrote after meeting with the bishop in the afternoon contrasted significantly with his comments at morning Mass.

In the letter. Madden wrote. "Despite the fact that I had been working closely with diocesan

officials on this matter, and knew that a vigorous internal review was well under way, I rushed ahead and joined our parish bookkeeper in hiring a private investigator, using our own personal funds. . . . In my actions and words, I betrayed your trust and the trust of my bishop, who has been working diligently to deal with the situation at hand."

Several parishioners said Madden had no reason to apologize.

"We should be thanking him for bringing this to our attention," said O'Connor.

Some said they do not believe Madden wrote the apology letter the diocese issued with his name on it.

One longtime parishioner, Julie Rikert, was embarrassed by how disrespectful parishioners were to the bishop during the tense meeting.

"I don't think they were treating the bishop well for his position," she said. "They didn't show any respect when these men got up and shouted. I just had my hands up and I was praying because I thought there was going to be a riot."

Rikert said parishioners have no one to blame but themselves for allowing Fay to rob them.

"We knew his lifestyle. We wondered where the money went," she said. "I think part of it is our fault. We weren't involved enough."

Parish council President Ed Sforza said questions were raised about Fay's spending as the parish moved from one renovation project to the next. Millions were spent to renovate the parish center and add a wing to the church in just a few years.

"Parishioners did question me about his extravagance, and I did question Father Jude," Sforza said. "His answer was, 'I think I have good taste and I do things in a tasteful manner.' "

Sforza said he had no indication the parish was in debt until Fay resigned last week.

Parishioners said they wondered where Fay got the money for his Audi, his expensive clothes and the catered dinner parties he would throw with live music for big donors.

"He was living the high life and stealing from the parish," said Phillip Dolcetti, a lifelong parishioner.

For a parish that take in about \$1 million a year in donations, hundreds of thousands of dollars could have been taken in the 15 years Fay was there, said Colucci, the private investigator.

"I found over \$200,000 and I wasn't anywhere near finished," he said. "I went to the cops when I had enough evidence. It is much, much more than that figure."

Colucci said he gave Darien police the results of his investigation last Wednesday; Lori announced Fay's resignation later that day.

Colucci said he learned during his investigation that Fay's boyfriend, Clifford Fantini of Philadelphia, also known as Cliff Martell, a fashion show director, spent nights at the rectory. According to published reports, Fay and Fantini own a condominium in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and have lived in an apartment in Manhattan.

Sherman, the attorney for the bookkeeper, said as far as he knew yesterday, Derario still had her job. Derario and Madden "did the right thing and they did it for absolutely selfless motives," Sherman said.

"Certainly they will be criticized for going outside the chain of command of the church. I think they were more interested in getting to the truth of the issues than possibly creating public relations problems for anyone," Sherman said. "They went to a private investigator and asked for help, and they took the product of his investigation to the appropriate authorities. Neither of them had anything to gain in doing this and probably everything to lose."

Asked whether they had taken their concerns to Lori, Sherman said, "Obviously neither of them felt that going to the bishop was going to be the best means to get to the truth. I am not trying to say Bishop Lori was negligent or guilty of any wrongdoing. The motivating factor for Beth and Father Mike was to make sure this church was in good hands."

Asked why Derario hired him, Sherman said, "She may not need an attorney. She is not being accused of any wrongdoing, and I do not expect that she will. We have no lawsuits that we're working up. But it's a scary situation where you are dealing with law enforcement authorities from many places, and she needs some guidance."

Besides Darien police and the diocese, federal authorities also are investigating the missing funds.