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St. Patrick's releases audit

By Adam Ashton

AASHTON@MERCEDSUN-STAR.COM

The ousted Rev. Jean-Michael Lastiri misspent \$60,157 over his last 20 months at the helm of Merced's St. Patrick's Parish, according to a special audit released Sunday.

In a letter to parishioners, Bishop John T. Steinbock, leader of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Fresno, said the parish was reimbursed, but he did not say whether Lastiri returned the money.

Lastiri could not be reached for comment. His cell phone indicated he was out of the area and not returning calls.

A group of six parishioners appointed by Monsignor Patrick McCormick met weekly for the past five months to analyze Lastiri's spending after a longtime St. Patrick's finance committee member said he saw evidence of inappropriate transactions in church records.

The committee discovered:

• Personal travel expenses amounting to \$19,880.82;

• Purchases for personal goods and services totaling \$10,765.94;

• Unauthorized personal loans totaling \$10,200;

• A car down payment for \$3,000;

• Other expenses amounting to \$16,310.54.

Lastiri was forced from his position as leader of the parish in July, when a group of church members collected information suggesting the priest indulged in sexual fantasies in Internet chat rooms.

Some of the messages Lastiri allegedly posted indicated he sought male sexual partners during trips to cities like Rome and Las Vegas.

His departure split the church for a time, with some parishioners praising him for his work in Merced, and others saying the priest could not continue to lead St. Patrick's because of his indiscretions.

The priest was also at the center of political rifts in the church, and he was unpopular among parishioners who strongly opposed abortion and homosexuality.

David Zacharias, a member of the audit committee, said the financial review could help settle some of the tumult from last summer.

"We certainly hope that this will allow us to put it behind us and concentrate on things in the parish -- to make the parish more vibrant, more prayerful," said Zacharias, 57, a Merced financial adviser.

Peter Fluetsch, a 20-year parish finance committee member, first raised questions about Lastiri's spending last summer, when he flipped through church accounting records and said he saw inappropriate checks for personal items, loans and travel.

Zacharias said some of Fluetsch's observations proved correct, but Zacharias would not identify them.

A report from the audit committee said McCormick, Lastiri's successor, has already taken steps to clean up the parish's books.

McCormick's efforts include: Cutting off parish credit cards; requiring finance committee votes on non-budgeted items costing more than \$5,000 instead of \$10,000; adding a financial report to weekly parish bulletins; insisting on detailed receipts for reimbursements; and laying plans for another audit at the end of this year.

Steinbock's letter said the diocese is also formulating a plan to increase financial oversight at its parishes throughout the San Joaquin Valley. The diocese intends to focus on creating new guidelines for finance committees and requiring more training for parish staff in bookkeeping methods.

Zacharias said those measures should restore confidence in some church-goers who have said they withheld donations because of questions about Lastiri's spending.

"We hope and anticipate that things will return to normal," he said.

Several church members who have said they curbed their giving because of Lastiri's spending did not want to comment on Sunday. *Reporter Adam Ashton can be reached at 385-2484 or aashton@mercedsun-star.com.*

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