



DIOCESE OF
METUCHEN

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Former Somerset pastor pleads guilty to theft

SOMERSET – The former pastor of St. Matthias Parish, Somerset, has pleaded guilty to one count of second-degree theft for diverting parish funds for his own personal use.

Fr. Douglas J. Haefner, 68, was criminally charged by the Somerset County Prosecutor’s Office and entered his plea before the Honorable Peter J. Tober, J.S.C., on Wednesday morning. He remains out on his own recognizance until his scheduled sentencing on Aug. 4.

“This is a sad and disturbing case for all involved, particularly for the people of the parish community who placed their trust and confidence in Fr. Haefner,” said Anthony P. Kearns III, Esq., spokesperson and chancellor of the Diocese of Metuchen. “We are grateful that this matter has come to its long-awaited conclusion.”

After Bishop James F. Checchio’s arrival in 2016 as Bishop of Metuchen, the parish’s financial struggles were noted and an audit of the parish was attempted, said Chancellor Kearns.

Due to serious health problems and needing additional time to prepare, each time the audit was scheduled to take place, Fr. Haefner requested to reschedule. The diocese accommodated the requests and Bishop Checchio even visited the former pastor when he was hospitalized. The diocese continued to collect and review the parish’s annual financial statements and reports submitted by the parish’s pastor, staff and lay trustees.

Eventually in 2018, as the audit finally began, the former pastor approached Bishop Checchio to disclose he had mishandled parish funds, saying he had borrowed money from the parish, which he had hoped to repay. At that same time, he also disclosed he was struggling with other personal problems.

Following protocol, the Diocese of Metuchen immediately notified the Somerset County Prosecutor’s Office and, together with the parish, cooperated fully with its investigation, which spanned two years. In addition, immediately after the disclosure, Fr. Haefner resigned as pastor and his priestly faculties were withdrawn. He underwent evaluation and received treatment as the investigation unfolded.

The diocese was asked to continue with its audit, which eventually confirmed the financial impropriety reported by the pastor. The Prosecutor’s Office then conducted its own forensic audit, which concluded that, in total, \$516,984.56 in parish funds was mishandled.

“Gratefully, both audits independently determined that no funds from the parochial school were ever misappropriated,” according to Chancellor Kearns. “Now that the Prosecutor’s Office has finished its work, the diocese and parish are able to continue working with insurance adjusters to assess restitution.”

Even before the onset of the financial impropriety at the parish, the Diocese of Metuchen had already begun to strengthen its financial practices, moving to a more regular auditing cycle by an independent auditor; requiring greater involvement by the laity in parish spending reviews; and submitting additional annual reports to the diocese. In addition, the diocese also established a new parish financial services office to assist the 90 parishes in the diocese with their financial practices and compliance.

As required by canon law, each parish is to have an active finance council, comprised of at least five parishioners who are regularly involved with the parish and who are knowledgeable and experienced in the management of financial affairs. Parish finance councils are expected to meet regularly and submit their meeting minutes to the diocese. They are also required to submit their annual financial report, signed by the pastor, the finance council and the lay trustees.

Bishop Checchio, who said he relies on pastors to make sound financial decisions in consultation with their respective finance councils, also directed the implementation of an anonymous, independent reporting mechanism for concerns by laity, staff, clergy and others surrounding parish finances.

“While this matter was certainly an exception to the financial safeguards in our parishes, the strengthening of our practices is meant to further ensure that the people of our diocese can have confidence in our systems and to know that their generous gifts will be used only for their intended purposes,” said Bishop Checchio. “I am very aware of the sacrifices the good people of our parishes make in order to make Christ known and loved throughout our local Church and world, especially in these times of financial uncertainty. Their sacrifices and their generosity must not ever be taken for granted, but instead must be used solely to fulfill our mission and restore His greater glory here on earth.”

In a letter to St. Matthias parishioners, the bishop said it was understandable that the matter weighed heavily as they awaited answers.

“While I am thankful a conclusion has been reached, I also remember, too, the many people who over the years expressed to me their compassion for Fr. Doug, who served as the pastor for so many years,” the bishop wrote in the letter. “I ask you to please remember him in your prayers as I do, even as I remember your good parish community in my own prayers. You, the people of this parish, are committed servants of the Lord, who have persevered in trusting in the promises of God while building a stronger, more secure future even as we faced this tragic trial. Our diocesan community is united with you in prayer and in our efforts to build a brighter tomorrow.”

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