



DIocese of METUCHEN

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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

August 20, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In the Responsorial Psalm for August 19, we prayed, “Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.” These words speak to who we are as a people of faith and they challenge us too. They challenge us to acknowledge the presence of God in our lives and to live our lives accordingly, making all of our decisions, committing all of our works, and carrying out all of our actions with Him in mind. Yet sometimes we fall short of this expectation in our world and even in our own lives.

As you know, on the same day that we prayed those words of Psalm 40, Fr. Doug reported to the Somerset County Jail, where he was remanded into the custody of the Department of Corrections to serve seven years in state prison for misappropriating \$516,984.56 of parish funds. The Diocese of Metuchen and the parish continue to work with insurance adjusters to assess restitution. During his sentencing hearing and by his own admission, Fr. Doug admitted to his failure of, for a time, living merely by his own humanity and not by God’s will.

Before he reported to the jail, Fr. Doug and I were in contact with one another, and he again expressed to me his remorse for the pain he brought to the parish community and the deep hurt he caused to the people of the parish, both of which I realize are still felt by those who loved him and were served by him. In our conversation, I assured him of my prayers and also agreed to convey his words of regret to the people of the parish community, as he had spoken them in his statement to the judge during his sentencing.

Even when faced by challenges, such as those that we have journeyed through in these past days, and even in these past years, our Lord is with us through them all. Please know that you have been in my prayers during these challenges too. Yes, in His goodness, the Lord never leaves us and by our Christian discipleship, we are called to remain close to Him too: “Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.”

With renewed best wishes, I remain

Yours in Christ,

Most Reverend James F. Checchio, JCD, MBA
Bishop of Metuchen

The following is part of a statement read by Fr. Douglas J. Haefner at the Aug. 4 sentencing hearing, during which he was sentenced to serve seven years in state prison. He asked that it be shared with his former parishioners.

I come before you this morning, a broken and wounded man.

I come to express my deep remorse and contrition for the charges to which I pleaded guilty to in May 2021.

I hurt and violated the trust of the people of Saint Matthias in Somerset NJ where I lived and gave more than 27 years in ministry and service.

I stand here humiliated and humbled by the crime I committed; and I deeply regret my actions that damaged a very vibrant community of faith that I loved.

I know the consequences of my actions warrant a just and fitting sentence to which I will be totally accountable and cooperative.

As I speak these words, I painfully think of all the children in the parish, who showed me so much love. I tried to help shape and form their lives; to help them believe in God's love and how they could live as God's children. I have let them down and will live with that sorrow in the years ahead.

The shame I live with in stealing from people who I had the privilege of being with in the most trying and joyous times is immense. I think of all the parishioners who came Sunday after Sunday, volunteered their time and donated their money. As a shepherd, these are the people I cared for; I violated their trust and shook their faith.

I am wrong. Words cannot express the deep remorse and regret and carry in my heart. I stand at the Court's mercy.

In my early years at St. Matthias, I was a workaholic, navigating my way through a parish that included a national recognized school, 130 employees, over 70 ministries and programs. My days and nights were spent counseling, planning and working tirelessly to insure the vibrancy of the parish.

Additionally, I offered my time and services to numerous community groups, including the police department. This began to take a toll on both my physical and mental health. Over time I began to self-isolate from my parish, family and friends. I sought help for depression; often my doctors did not believe me because of my personality and humor. Throughout my life, humor has been a way of hiding and avoiding my pain, grief and low self-esteem.

My depression escalated following the death of my father. Again, the needs of parishioners and work of the parish did not afford me the time to grieve.

Slowly I began to escape more often, isolating in hotels where I slept most of the day and watched TV.

It was at this time that my gambling addiction became more compulsive. Soon that was accompanied by spending and buying things. It was a way of self-medicating the deeper issues I avoided.

I began using parish funds. Some of it I paid back at times, but the addiction got out of control. I lived with the illusion – the lie – that I was just borrowing the money and would pay it back.

No longer able to live with the guilt and shame of what I did, I went to Bishop Checchio. I told him of my inner struggles and what I had done. I spoke to him how my physical health had suffered as well as my mental health. It was humbling to stand before him and tell him I was sick and needed help.

Upon my resignation and suspension, I spent 7 months at the St. John Vianney Rehabilitation Center, Downingtown PA. It is a facility for priests and religious. With nowhere to isolate, to lie to myself or others, I finally began a real road toward recovery.

What I have come to see in the past 3 years, is that my spending and gambling are the symptoms of my deeper issues of trauma, loss, anxiety, guilt depression and low self-esteem. I do not say any of this as an excuse for the choices I made. It has however helped me finally see a path toward recovery.

I have learned addictive people hurt those they love the most. I hurt the people I loved the most: my parishioners, family and friends.

One of the great sorrows of my life involves the final year of my mother's life. Following my discharge from St. John Vianney I went to live with her in the final stages of dementia. Eventually she was placed in a care facility. Our ability to visit her changed due to Covid restrictions.

In one of our last conversations, she looked at me and asked, "are you still a priest." I told her yes, to which she said, "but you got in trouble." I started to cry. "I hurt the people of St. Matthias and I hurt and disappointed you mom." Then I said I am sorry, and I hope you can forgive me. In what seemed to be a moment of lucidity, she looked at me and said, "of course I forgive you. I love you, I'm your mother."

I stand before you, having lost almost everything in my life. I do not want to be remembered as the priest who stole from his parishioners, but as a priest who sought forgiveness and by the power of love, can once again become the man and priest I am called to be.

I am truly sorry. I am grateful to have been given this time to share with you.

Fr. Doug Haefner