



DIOCESE OF METUCHEN

St. John Neumann Pastoral Center • P.O. Box 191, Metuchen, New Jersey 08840-0191
P: 732.562.2458 • F: 732.562.1427 • E: office.of.the.bishop@diometuchen.org

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

August 4, 2021

Memorial of St. John Vianney

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is not easy to slow ourselves in these days of summer. The summer months may have at one time represented quieted lifestyles and slowed news cycles but now, both seem to be operating at an all-time high, as our minds continuously churn with information about the latest coronavirus updates, Olympic medals won, and, yes, even news about our Catholic Church.

As you have likely already seen, our local Catholic Church was in the public eye today as news spread about the sentencing of Fr. Doug Haefner, the former pastor of St. Matthias Parish in Somerset, adding to the ever-changing headlines that preoccupy our minds. He was sentenced this afternoon to serve 7 years in prison for his misappropriation of parish funds. As you know, he pleaded guilty in May to one count of second-degree theft, specifically for diverting \$516,984.56 of parish funds for his own personal use, which he said he had hoped to repay. Though this news comes as no surprise to us, as we had followed the progress of the forensic financial audit for nearly two years, it is nonetheless unfortunate.

The news of his sentencing is, of course, devastating for Fr. Haefner, who will undoubtedly carry the burden of his actions with him each day, remembering the many people affected by his crime. Today's news will also be a sad reminder to the people of the St. Matthias Parish community, who over the years expressed to me their compassion for their longtime pastor. I ask you to please remember Fr. Haefner and the people of the parish in your prayers.

Upon hearing the outcome of his sentencing, I also remembered in prayer our entire diocesan community, in a particular way, our priests, whom we remember and pray for today as we celebrate the Memorial of St. John Vianney, patron of priests. Their everyday good efforts to incarnate the Word of God in our parishes and communities of our four-county diocese, is inspiring and gives me great hope for the future of our Church. But news such as that we received today, can unashamedly undermine all the good that is happening here in this local Church of Metuchen.

So, while I am saddened by the news, I am reminded and encouraged by all that has been done and all that continues to light a fire in the heart of our Church, a light that cannot be extinguished or darkened by the shadows of sin or evil. Our clergy, our Catholic school principals, administrators and teachers, our diocesan and parish ministry lay leaders, our social service agency staff members, our healthcare workers, and you – the people of God of this

diocese – each beautifully contribute to the building up of the Kingdom of God here and for that, I am continually grateful and thank God.

In order that the good work happening here in the name of our merciful Father can continue rather than being overshadowed by any darkness, the Diocese of Metuchen has taken further steps recently to strengthen our financial procedures.

As I have communicated with you over this past year, changes to our financial procedures were already in the process of being made when Fr. Haefner first disclosed to me his crime. In the most recent change to our procedures, our diocese announced last week a new partnership with NAVEX Global's EthicsPoint, which has been in the works and has been discussed with our Diocesan Finance Council and Presbyteral Council for some time. This partnership, which is effective immediately, will allow any person who suspects financial impropriety in the Diocese of Metuchen or in any of its parishes, schools or cemeteries, to file an anonymous and confidential report through the EthicsPoint independent third-party reporting system.

Reports can be made by calling the hotline 844-796-1296 or can be filed directly through the independent website: diometuchen.ethicspoint.com, the link to which is also available on the diocese's website: diometuchen.org.

Once a report is filed with EthicsPoint, either via the website or the toll-free phone number, the information is shared with an EthicsPoint communication specialist, who will then forward the report to the review committee, unless the report names someone on the committee.

This new measure is in addition to those that were put into place since my arrival in 2016, including the move to a more regular audit cycle for our parishes by an independent auditor; the requirement for greater involvement by the laity in parish spending reviews; and the submission of additional annual reports to the diocese. As I have shared with you previously, I also directed the establishment of a new Office of Parish and Financial Services to assist the 90 parishes in our diocese with their financial practices and compliance.

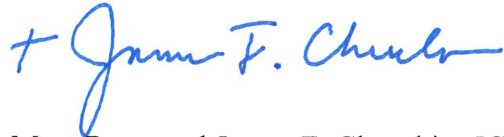
These efforts are the fruits of ongoing discussions and discernment, with consideration, input and guidance offered by members of our Diocesan Finance Council and the Diocesan Presbyteral Council. God-willing, these measures will lead us to an even greater sense of financial transparency and fiscal responsibility in all areas of our diocese.

I am thankful the Lord has blessed me with the distinction of serving as your Shepherd here in this beautiful Diocese of Metuchen and I am grateful, too, to collaborate with a great number of dedicated priests, deacons, religious and lay ministers here in this vineyard. I ask you, in your kindness, to please join me in praying for our priests today, that through the intercession of St. John Vianney whose memorial we celebrate today, our priests may increasingly shape our hearts to be unto like His Divine Heart and never grow tired of leading souls to Him, even when faced with challenge.

Know of my love and prayers for you. I encourage you to use these final weeks of summer as an opportunity to rest, detach from daily concerns, and re-focus on giving your entire self to God as we strive to be His faithful disciples throughout our counties, making the world into the place He desires it to be. Please continue to pray for me too, so that together we can continue to bring people closer to Christ through our words, our deeds, and, importantly, our prayers.

With renewed best wishes, I remain

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James F. Checchio". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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