



DIOCESE OF  
**METUCHEN**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

August 4, 2021

**Former pastor sentenced to seven years for theft**

SOMERVILLE – A former pastor who diverted parish funds for his own personal use was sentenced Wednesday to serve seven years in state prison.

Fr. Douglas J. Haefner, 68, the longtime pastor of St. Matthias Parish, Somerset, pleaded guilty in May to one count of second-degree theft – specifically, misappropriating \$516,984.56 of parish funds, which he said he had hoped to repay.

He first disclosed the misused funds to Metuchen Bishop James F. Checchio in 2018, when an audit at the parish was already underway. The Diocese of Metuchen immediately notified the Somerset County Prosecutor’s Office and, together with the parish, cooperated fully with its investigation. During his disclosure to the bishop, Fr. Haefner resigned as the pastor.

“This is not an easy day for anyone,” said Anthony P. Kearns III, Esq., spokesperson and chancellor of the Diocese of Metuchen. “While we are grateful this matter has come to its conclusion and justice has been served, there are no winners in the outcome of this unfortunate case. We ask for your continued prayers for the parish community, the entire diocesan community, and for Fr. Haefner, who will serve out his sentence, carrying the heavy burden of his actions with him each day.”

The Honorable Peter J. Tober, J.S.C., imposed a sentence of seven years in state prison, pursuant to the plea agreement. Fr. Haefner must report to the Somerset County Jail on Aug. 19, where he will be remanded into the custody of the Department of Corrections. The prosecutor agreed not to object to Fr. Haefner's application for Intensive Supervised Parole.

“Most assuredly, this entire matter emphasizes the need for strong fiscal procedures and protections in our Church. The faithful regularly entrust their financial support to our parishes, our Catholic schools, and our diocese in support of building the Kingdom of God. Only through their generosity, can our local Church make Christ more known and loved in the world,” said Chancellor Kearns. “We must never take their stewardship for granted – and I can assure you, we do not – nor can we underestimate the magnitude of our responsibility to properly steward these gifts.”

According to Chancellor Kearns, the need to implement stronger fiscal procedures was first identified by Bishop Checchio shortly after he was ordained and installed as the new shepherd of Metuchen in 2016. Later that same year, the bishop noted the financial struggles at St. Matthias

Parish. Immediately, attempts to audit the parish's financials were made. With each attempt made, Fr. Haefner requested to reschedule, citing a need for additional time to prepare due to the serious medical problems for which he was being treated. At one point, the effects of his medical conditions led him to be treated in the hospital, where the bishop visited him. The diocese accommodated the requests, for a time, and continued to collect and review the parish's annual financial statements and reports submitted by the parish's pastor, staff and lay trustees.

As part of the efforts that have been made to reinforce its fiscal procedures, the Diocese of Metuchen recently announced its partnership with NAVEX Global's EthicsPoint, an independent third-party reporting system that 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.

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

The new measure is in addition to those that were already in place, including the move to a more regular audit cycle 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. 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. The Diocese of Metuchen also relies on a finance council, comprised mostly of lay members who are financial experts in their respective industries to assist in reviews of all the audits.

“Our diocese is blessed with a great number of people – our pastors, our Catholic school principals, administrators and teachers, our diocesan and parish ministry leaders, our social service agency staff members, and our healthcare workers – all working to bring the Word of God alive in our local Church,” said Chancellor Kearns. “There is much good that has been done and many worthy efforts that continue to be made each day, at St. Matthias Parish and at the 89 other parishes in our diocese. We are grateful that these strengthened procedures will allow us all to continue on the right pathway forward, so that we can continue to share Christ with all who need Him.”

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