

Audit leads to resignation of Havre de Grace pastor

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After a monthslong forensic audit of St. Patrick Parish in Havre de Grace revealed a lack of fiscal controls and good stewardship of parish finances, the pastor, Father William O'Brien, resigned Sept. 15.

Father O'Brien had stepped aside from public ministry in May while the archdiocese and an independent accounting firm conducted an audit.

In a Sept. 15 letter to St. Patrick parishioners, Archbishop William E. Lori thanked them for their patience during the months of study. He noted that the forensic audit confirmed concerns related to three primary areas raised by the preliminary audit:

- "A profound lack of fiscal controls, oversight and good stewardship of parish finances;
- "Lack of documentation for reimbursements as well as improper reimbursements to Father O'Brien totaling more than \$50,000;
- "Numerous instances in which, although receipts were provided, reimbursements to the pastor violated archdiocesan policies regarding the purpose, amount or record-keeping for such reimbursements."

The archbishop's letter said that Father O'Brien has agreed to repay to the parish the amount of undocumented reimbursements he received.

The archbishop further noted that the parish has accumulated more than \$500,000 in unpaid cathedraticum (the funds paid by each parish to the archdiocese to help fund central services operations) since 2005. Father O'Brien became St. Patrick's pastor in 2000.

Archbishop Lori appointed Father Dale Picarella, pastor of St. Philip Neri Parish in Linthicum, as administrator of St. Patrick Parish, effective Oct. 1. Father Picarella will be responsible for oversight of St. Patrick's day-to-day operations as part of his pastoral care for the parish.

The archbishop also has instructed William Baird III, archdiocesan chief financial officer, to "supervise implantation of key recommendations made by the auditors to ensure appropriate fiscal controls and practices are in place for the responsible stewardship of the parish's finances moving forward."

Baird told the Catholic Review the archdiocese has an internal audit team that can identify concerns at parishes in the audit phase, but that his team is primarily available to help parishes get where they want to be financially.

Pastors cannot do it all, he said, and they rely on their parish corporators, parish councils and finance councils to help them run the parish smoothly.

“The pastor needs to use these (structures) to shepherd the financial resources while fulfilling all the pastoral needs of the parish,” he said.

Pastors “have to have good people around them they can trust, but they cannot be hands-off. Pastors have to be engaged all the way,” Baird said.

In his letter to the parish, Archbishop Lori asked for prayers for Father O’Brien as the archbishop works with him “to identify the next phase of his priestly ministry.”

“I know many of you remain grateful to Father O’Brien for his pastoral service these many years,” the archbishop said.

Also see:

In Havre de Grace, St. Patrick looks to second century