

IRS change sparks few changes in tithing at parishes

On Jan. 1 the Internal Revenue Service made it mandatory that all charitable donations come with a paper trail to claim them on next year's tax return, but pastors at some Baltimore area Catholic churches have seen little change in parishioners' tithing practices.

"The new rules haven't been in place long enough for us to see a change yet," said Deacon Paul Weber, business manager for St. Ignatius, Baltimore. "We're making a push to get more people to use envelopes or write checks. But, it takes a while for people to change their habits."

Up until Dec. 31, it was acceptable to estimate cash donations while filing tax returns.

However, the Pension Protection Act of 2006 requires taxpayers to supply the IRS with official documents acknowledging their cash donations.

Though taxpayers won't be required to furnish payment proof this year, they will need records of their donations - which include tithing - they make during the 2007 calendar year.

Under the new law, taxpayers will need documentation that proves they donated the money, even if it was placed in the collection basket at church, said Steve Wiseman, a partner at Wiseman Associates, a Bel Air accounting firm.

The new law was enacted to prevent taxpayers from over inflating their cash contributions, said Mr. Wiseman, a parishioner at St. Ignatius, Hickory.

One of the more fashionable methods in tithing tracking has been the use of envelopes provided by a parish, allowing church officials to keep a record of the contributions and provide the parishioner with a statement at the end of the fiscal year, said Father Raymond D. Martin, pastor of Holy Cross, Federal Hill.

However, there is no way to decipher who has tossed loose cash in the collection

basket, and no record can be made on those kinds of anonymous contributions, said Father Paul Zaborowski, O.F.M. Cap., pastor of St. Ambrose.

“A lot of our parishioners tithe with a personal check, and we automatically keep track of those funds,” Father Zaborowski said. “We give those parishioners a statement at the end of the year too.”

Though he said envelope requests have picked up since the first of the year, the office hasn’t been overwhelmed with requests.

Several parishes in the Archdiocese of Baltimore began running notices about the change in the law in their bulletins before the beginning of the year, however, some churches passed the information along in the weekly communiqué at the end of January.

“I also want to make sure we are giving our parishioners correct information before we put it in the bulletin,” Father Martin said. “Once I’m 100 percent about the information, we’ll inform the people in our church.”

Monsignor James O. McGovern said he wasn’t surprised that envelope registration hadn’t increased at Church of the Resurrection, Ellicott City, since the first of the year.

“We usually get those kinds of registrations in the summer,” the pastor said.

And while the IRS may have new rules for cash donations, Father P. Edward Kenny Jr., pastor of St. Mary of the Assumption, Govans doesn’t see a need to overhaul his parish collection measures.

“We feel like our procedures pretty well cover the new regulations,” Father Kenny said. “It provides a confirmation from the parish, and that is what’s needed.”