Philadelphia priest under investigation, steps down as parish pastor

WASHINGTON – A priest of the Philadelphia Archdiocese resigned as pastor of a parish after federal agents raided the rectory where he lived.

Father Geraldo J. Pinero stepped down as pastor of Incarnation of Our Lord Parish in Philadelphia, Nov. 19 "for the good of the parish pending the outcome of this investigation," said a statement from the archdiocese.

The resignation followed the appearance of agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the U.S. Postal Inspection Service Nov. 16 at the rectory.

Mark Medvesky, spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Philadelphia, declined to discuss why the agency entered the rectory or whether anything was confiscated. Nor did he confirm that an investigation of the priest was under way.

"We didn't arrest anybody or detain anybody," Medvesky said.

ICE is charged with investigating cross-border activities involving cash, products or individuals.

Donna Farrell, director of communications for the archdiocese, said the archdiocese was unaware of the reason for the federal intervention.

"We're letting the investigation unfold," she said.

Father Pinero, 46, had been pastor of the multicultural parish in north Philadelphia's Olney neighborhood since 2004, Farrell said. The parish website lists weekly Masses celebrated in English, Spanish, Portuguese and Creole.

Previously, Father Pinero had been assigned to the parish as parochial vicar between 1991 and 1997 and then took a three-year leave of absence, she explained.

After the leave, he returned to active ministry at St. Joseph Parish in suburban Aston, Pa., where he served until returning to Incarnation of Our Lord Parish in 2003 as parochial administrator before becoming pastor the following year, she said.

The archdiocese named Monsignor Hugh J. Shields, vicar for Hispanic Catholics, as parochial administrator of the parish after Father Pinero stepped down.

An Internet search of the priest's name revealed that a man identified as Jerry Pinero was involved in at least three online multilevel marketing ventures. Photos on the sites match those of Father Pinero.

One photo, on the priest's LinkedIn online profile, shows Father Pinero dressed in a tuxedo. The profile identifies him as a mentor at Mentoring for Free and as a team leader at Infinity Downline, both multilevel marketing operations, as well as pastor of Incarnation of the Lord Church.

"My interests include sharing faith, personal development, network marketing, writing, blogging and enjoying good times with good people," he wrote on the site.

Network or multilevel marketing involves the recruitment of a sales force that receives compensation for sales they personally generate as well as for the sales of others they recruit. Under such a scheme, a sales hierarchy develops. Compensation is based on the level a person reaches in the hierarchy. In theory, the higher up the hierarchy a person rises, the greater the income received.

At the Mentoring for Free website, Father Pinero is pictured under the slogan "MLM is about YOU. It's not about products or companies." The site offers those who join the venture a copy of "Success in 10 Steps," which provides "insider secrets from 26 years in network marketing." A toll-free phone number and an online form requesting information is included on the site.

Another site with the priest's name listed as the copyright holder, AshMax, promotes "the art of making money" and the possibility of earning $22,295 a month after paying an initial $25 membership fee.

E-mail and telephone messages to Father Pinero were not returned.

Farrell told Catholic News Service archdiocesan policy prohibits a priest from holding employment in a secular setting. Exceptions can be made, she explained, for a teaching position, a chaplaincy or lecturing on faith-based topics but only with the permission of the archdiocese.