

SPIRITUAL LIFE:

Milton man urges church to do better job of protecting collections.

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For The Patriot Ledger

Posted Oct 09, 2011 @ 07:30 AM

A company and its numerous branches do a largely cash business. The money is collected, dumped into a sack, and left in an unsecured space for 12 hours or more to be counted later. Meanwhile, others have access to the area where the money is held. The cash moves, with little or no accountability, through different hands before it is deposited into the bank. Theft and embezzlement are known issues, but the owner refuses to put a secure system in place.

This is how the Catholic Church treats its weekly collections, according to author Michael W. Ryan who wrote, "Nonfeasance: The Remarkable Failure of the Catholic Church To Protect Its Primary Source of Income" (Michael W. Ryan, \$14.95, 2011, www.Lulu.com). The definition of nonfeasance is "failure to act: especially: failure to do what ought to be done."

Ryan, now retired in Milton, has served as a U.S. postal inspector since 1963, conducting audits, evaluating security systems, and investigating fraud. He continues to be a devout and practicing Catholic, whose motivation is fueled by his faith. At Sunday Mass with others, he recites "The Confiteor," a prayer that asks forgiveness for "what I have failed to do." Failing to act, when one knows the right thing to do, can be sinful.

According to Ryan, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has refused to initiate basic reforms in the way its churches handle their principal source of income: the Sunday collection. Made up of nearly 18,000 parishes spread among 195 dioceses and archdioceses, the Catholic Church in America has no common guidelines or secure measures for protecting weekly revenues. Ryan's question is, "Why?"

The Association of Certified Fraud Examiners issued a 2008 report about organizations in general. Among other findings, they concluded:

Anti-fraud controls do have a measurable impact on an organization's exposure to fraud. The typical U.S. organization loses 7 percent of its annual revenues to fraudulent activity, and occupational fraudsters are generally first-time offenders,

The majority of asset misappropriation schemes focus on cash, and about 85 percent of all asset appropriation cases studied involved theft or misuse of cash.

The Catholic Church is highly susceptible to internal fraud. How much money has it lost? No one knows. From his documented research, Ryan estimates Sunday collection embezzlements produced a loss of \$89.8 million for the Catholic Church of America in 2010 alone. This figure is based on his assumption that stealing occurs in 20 percent of the parishes, each with an average weekly loss of \$500. Ryan maintains this is a conservative estimate since church-related embezzlement convictions often reveal weekly thefts of \$1,000 and more.

Consider a 2006 report by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that indicated a total of Catholic giving at Sunday collections of \$5.864 billion in 2002. No current figures are available, but the potential for overall loss is staggering.

For more than 20 years, Ryan has gone to church authorities regarding simple safeguards, such as tamper-proof polyethylene bags that are serially numbered and self-sealing, supervised counting, and independent documentation. Yet when he went up the chain of command – parish pastors, then-Cardinal Bernard Law, Cardinal Sean O'Malley, and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops – his pleas for reform were ignored.

At a time of unprecedented church closings, this money matters. The lack of responsible accounting to parishioners is a sinful burden Ryan squarely places on the shoulders of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the highest body that has the power to create change, and yet refuses to do so.

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