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'Bishop of bling' was not thinking with Jesus

Fr. Peter Daly | Nov. 4, 2013 Parish Diary

What was he thinking, the "bishop of bling"?

How could German Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst spend $42 million renovating his episcopal residence? Hasn't he read the Gospels? Doesn't he know the story of Lazarus and Dives from Luke's 16th chapter? In this globalized world, didn't he hear Lazarus at his gate?

Why did he think that in a world where children go bed hungry and homeless people sleep in cars or on heating grates, even in rich countries like Germany, he could spend $20,000 on a bathtub? Why did he fly first class to India to visit orphans? How could he think that was OK? Didn't his conscience bother him?

He cannot say this was some momentary lapse in judgment. It was part of a pattern. It takes time to spend $40 million on a home renovation. It took me more than a year to remodel my mother's little kitchen in Baltimore. The bishop must have been spending nonstop from the time he was appointed as bishop of Limburg (near Frankfurt) only five years ago.

It is true that not all of the $40 million was spent on his private apartments. Some of was spent on his private 800-square-foot fitness room. About $1.1 million went to the private landscaped gardens and fountains. A couple of million went to the fortress-like walls that surrounded the bishop's house. Some of the $40 million went into the elegant private chapel, a "black box" of a building that the German papers said looked like ka'ba in Mecca.

This bishop's house would have been expensive even by the standards of superstars, sports heroes or rap artists. Michael Jordan's mansion just outside of Chicago recently went on the market for $25 million. A bargain compared to the bishop's house. And Mike's house has a full basketball court. If the bishop had wanted to be "like Mike," would have saved a lot of money.

Where did Tebartz-van Elst learn such things? Did he learn them in the seminary? Did he learn it when he did graduate work at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana? Did he learn it at Munster, when he was writing about how to teach the faith to adults? Does he think his lifestyle was a good catechesis for followers of Jesus?

Perhaps the bishop was merely following the example of Catholic popes and bishops from the pages of history. Maybe he had read about popes like Alexander VI (the Borgia pope) or Julius II (Della Rovere) who both loved to decorate in the Vatican.

Maybe the bishop of Limburg was familiar with the Avignon Papacy, where popes and cardinals constructed enormous houses financed by exorbitant taxes on local dioceses. Perhaps he has visited Hampton Court, where Cardinal Thomas Wolsey built the most lavish palace of Renaissance England, financed by "favors." Or closer to home, there is the bishop's palace in Salzburg, Austria. Now a giant museum, the bishop's residence was once one of the most lavish homes of Europe. Mozart was hired as the court musician. In fact, all throughout Germany and Austria, the "lord" bishops ruled in splendor. Bishop Tebartz-van Elst had plenty of historical

precedent.

Even here in the U.S., we have plenty of role models for self-aggrandizing and self-indulgent bishops and priests with their palatial residences. Cardinal George Mundelein in Chicago built a palace on the seminary grounds north of Chicago, including a private lake. Cardinal William O'Connell of Boston was "nakedly ambitious and endlessly self-aggrandizing," according to historian Charles R. Morris [1]. He built a Renaissance palazzo in Brighton. Cardinal Sean O'Malley recently sold it to pay the child abuse claims. Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York lived and traveled like a prince. Archbishop Rembert Weakland extravagantly renovated his residence in Milwaukee.

Some cardinals, like Raymond Burke, formerly of St. Louis, spend more lavishly on vestments than houses. Burke reportedly spent $30,000 for a single set of vestments to be worn at evening prayer. From New York to Los Angeles, from Boston to Miami, the princes of the church have lived like robber barons.

The cult of self-indulgence is not just a Catholic problem. Practically every televangelist and megachurch pastor has his own palace. Remember Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and Oral Roberts?

All these fancy homes are a scandal, pure and simple. They scandalize the faithful and they are a stumbling block that keeps people from coming to Christ. Better that a millstone should be tied around their necks and they be cast into the sea, Jesus says (Luke 17:2). Jesus also says we cannot serve both God and mammon (Luke 16:13) and that we should "be on guard against greed in all its forms" (Luke 12:13).

People have had enough of this self-aggrandizing pomposity of church leaders.

Even the bishop of Limburg realizes that. Tebartz-van Elst wrote to his diocese Aug. 31 seeking to explain his actions, even if he did not exactly apologize. He admitted he'd had second thoughts: "Looking back, I would have done some things differently. It is true, even a bishop is not immune to doubts and must be able to bear criticism."

"Mistakes were made," as they say.

Very few people are entirely detached from material things. We all fall victim to the sins of greed and avarice. I am not a paragon of virtue in regard to materialism. I live in a nice rectory. I drive a nice car. I do not live as simply as the Lord would like. But I do not live lavishly. I live an ordinary middle-class American life.

I think that perhaps ordinary life should be the standard for bishops and priests. We should live like our people. A German bishop should live like an ordinary German. An American should live like the average American.

When Jesus sent the disciples out on their first missions, he told them to stay at whatever house they came to and not to move from house to house. I interpret that to mean that we should not be constantly looking for a better accommodation, but accept whatever the Lord provides and people offer.

Our houses should be simple, clean and in good repair. But they should not be luxurious. My rectory is an old farmhouse, built in 1884. Our church bought it 60 years ago. It was in bad shape then. During the 19 years I have lived here, the parish has spent a total of about $60,000 on repairs and improvements, averaging about $3,000 per year. Mostly, we have just done the essentials like putting in a new furnace, a new roof, new appliances and new windows. This year, we added a sun porch, which was our biggest expenditure in 20 years. I live like my parishioners: comfortably but not lavishly.

The Limburg affair stands as a cautionary tale to priests and bishops everywhere. Don't spend money on yourself. There is a world of need at your gate.

Moreover, in the church, there is a new sheriff in town. Pope Francis actually takes Jesus' words seriously. He expects us to live simply. Jesus really means what he says when he tells us to "go and sell all you have and give to the poor, *then* come back and follow me." (Luke 18:22 and Mt. 19: 21)

What was the "bishop of bling" thinking when he spent $42 million on his house? He was not thinking with Jesus. Perhaps he wasn't thinking at all.

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