News



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A priest in Michigan is awaiting an August trial after being accused of embezzling more than $5 million from a parish in Okemos, in central Michigan, in the Diocese of Lansing.

But it's unclear whether the Aug. 13 trial for Fr. Jonathan Wehrle will go ahead as planned, after his attorney in the criminal case said he "will be withdrawing," according to a July 18 report in the Lansing State Journal newspaper.

According to the newspaper, the announcement from Wehrle's attorney came after Michigan State Police said in a news release that investigators from its Special Investigation Section discovered more than $63,000 in cash stashed above the ceiling tiles of the basement of the priest's home during a July 17 search. The newspaper reported that police said the bundled cash authorities found had the

words "For deposit only -- St. Martha Parish and School," the name of the parish where he served from 1988 until June 2017.

In a May 2017 statement, the diocese said the priest was "on administrative leave from his pastorate" but also said Wehrle submitted his retirement effective June 28, 2017. The Diocese of Lansing said in a July 25 call to Catholic News Service that it could not comment on the pending case.

The priest faces six felony counts of embezzlement.

News stories on the case point to a "lavish" home the priest is said to have built, allegedly with money from the parish, according to police. In a March 19 story titled, "How a $42K-a-year priest built mansion worth millions," The Detroit News newspaper describes the home where the priest lived, as a "two-story, stone-facade house" with "eight bedrooms, 12 bathrooms, a library, wine cellar, indoor swimming pool and wood-paneled elevator. The 11,300-square-foot home boasts granite counter tops, limestone fireplaces, walnut hardwood floors, crystal chandeliers and stained-glass windows.

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The publication said a contractor estimated the home's worth at $3 million to $4 million. It also pointed out that the priest, who had an affinity for construction, had earlier built another home with parish money and reimbursed the parish, but pointed out a discrepancy in the amount of the reimbursement, the mortgage, and what the home had sold for.

A Michigan-based group called Opus Bono that says it raises money to help priests in need has been trying to raise money for Wehrle's legal defense.

In addition to the criminal charges, the priest also is facing a civil lawsuit filed by Princeton Excess and Surplus Lines Insurance Corp., the insurance company for the diocese, which says it has paid "about $2.5 million to the diocese to cover its losses so far," according to an April 3 story in Insurance Journal.