News



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Washington — August 7, 2018

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A judge has postponed a mid-August trial for a priest accused of embezzling more than $5 million from a parish in Okemos, in central Michigan, part of the Diocese of Lansing.

Fr. Jonathan Wehrle was facing an Aug. 13 trial but his attorney in the criminal case told the Lansing State Journal he was withdrawing, prompting the judge in early August to push the trial to January 2019 to give new defense attorneys time to prepare, the newspaper said.

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. A July 18

news release from Michigan State Police says officers found the words "For deposit only — St. Martha Parish and School," the name of the parish where he served from 1988 until June 2017, on the cash bundles.

The priest faces six felony counts of embezzlement of $100,000 or more.

State police said in the press release that "in total, $1,107,444.98 has been seized from Wehrle in an attempt to recover embezzled funds from St. Martha's Parish."

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.

News stories on the case point to a "lavish" home the priest is said to have built, allegedly with money from the parish.

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The Detroit News newspaper said the 11,300-square-foot home has eight bedrooms, 12 bathrooms, a library, wine cellar, indoor swimming pool and wood-paneled elevator. 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.

In addition to the criminal charges, the priest also is facing a civil lawsuit filed by Princeton Excess and Surplus Lines Insurance Co., 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.

In a related matter, a group that said it was a nonprofit raising money for Wehrle's legal defense and had done the same for other priests, now, too, is facing legal challenges of its own.

The Michigan Attorney General alleged that organizers of the group Opus Bono were using some of the money donated for personal use and is seeking criminal charges.