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The Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul, the seat of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia, located in downtown Philadelphia. (Photo courtesy of Wikipedia/Creative Commons)

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A former business manager at a suburban Philadelphia parish has been charged with stealing more than $1.1 million, allegedly diverting funds through his private companies while billing the parish as a subcontractor.

The reputed thefts were discovered by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia during an internal review of parish finances after the business manager was dismissed from his position.

Sean Sweeney was arrested Nov. 20 and charged by Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, District Attorney Kevin Steele with multiple counts of theft, as well as receiving stolen property, unlawful use of communications and records tampering.

Sweeney had served as the business manager from 2017 to mid-2024 at St. Matthias Parish in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, located just outside of Philadelphia.

According to Steele's office, the 60-year-old Sweeney — currently a resident of Mount Pleasant, South Carolina — was required to surrender his passport. He was forbidden from having contact with employees connected to the case and from being "at or near" St. Matthias. A preliminary hearing will take place Dec. 3.

Kenneth Gavin, chief communications officer for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, told OSV News the charges were "serious and disturbing to all of us."

He noted that St. Matthias parishioners had been apprised of the matter during all of the Masses over the Nov. 22-23 weekend.

Court documents show that funds from the accounts of Sweeney's companies were used to cover tuition, vehicles, vacation costs, gambling, real estate and legal fees.

Gavin said that shortly after Sweeney's departure, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's parish services office had assumed bookkeeping responsibilities for St. Matthias, which led to the discovery of the financial irregularities.

"As part of their initial review of parish financial records, a number of bookkeeping discrepancies were noted that centered on payments for the contracted services provided by Mr. Sweeney during his term of service," said Gavin, who also noted that St. Matthias was the only archdiocesan entity at which Sweeney had been contracted.

After "a more detailed examination," the archdiocese referred the matter to Steele's office in December 2024, with the parish and the archdiocese cooperating with law enforcement — and with the archdiocese "committed to seeking full restitution to the parish," Gavin said.

The indictment shows the archdiocese had discovered Sweeney appeared "to have paid himself in excess of $200,000 per year for over five years" while serving the parish.

The review also revealed that Sweeney was affiliated with two companies while at St. Matthias, Merrion Square Advisors and Merrion Square Capital. Between 2017 and 2024, checks totaling just over $225,000 had been issued to the companies "for payroll-related services," said the indictment.

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For the period 2018 through 2024, Sweeney and his companies had received more than $1.13 million as "reimbursements," rather than income, in direct deposit payments, the indictment said.

Citing payroll records, the indictment — referencing an IRS tax term — said Sweeney had been listed as a 1099 contractor, meaning he was paid after he had provided an invoice for his services, with payment to be approved by the pastor of St. Matthias.

The indictment also said that the payroll records "show that Sweeney received direct deposits for the 'reimbursements' as if he were incurring work-related expenses and the employer was reimbursing him.

"These payments are not treated as taxable income and therefore not included in the annual 1099 tax statement," said the indictment.

Archdiocesan investigators interviewed the four pastors and parochial administrators under whom Sweeney had worked, said the indictment.

All four said that Sweeney had presented invoices for his services and drafted checks for them to sign — but that there was no need for him to be reimbursed beyond payment for those services, with two of the clergy expressly stating they had never authorized such reimbursements.

Msgr. Gerard Mesure, who hired Sweeney in 2017, recalled that Sweeney had asked to be paid as a contractor, rather than an employee.

In addition, Msgr. Mesure said Sweeney had been reluctant to connect the parish financial records to CathoNet — a centralized software platform required by the archdiocese — claiming "a software compatibility issue."

Fr. Sean Bransfield, who was parochial administrator at St. Matthias from June 2021 to June 2022, finally succeeded in having Sweeney bring the parish finances into CathoNet by the spring of 2022 "after much goading and urging," according to the indictment.

Two other parochial administrators also experienced difficulties with Sweeney. Fr. Brian Kean, parochial administrator from June 2022 to June 2023, reported that Sweeney was rarely, and only irregularly, in the office. Msgr. Francis Beach, who succeeded Kean as parochial administrator from June 2023 to June 2024, said he had been warned by a finance council member that Sweeney had "personal finance issues" and was borrowing funds from family without repayment.

Beach, under whom Sweeney's employment was terminated in the summer of 2024, told archdiocesan investigators that Sweeney's inconsistency eroded trust, according to the indictment.

The indictment also said Sweeney had told detectives he had been retained by the parish to undertake what he called "development" work, marketing available rental space in the shuttered parish school and its gym, for a fee of $7,500 per pay period, or about $150,000 annually.

However, both Msgr. Mesure and retired parish facilities manager David Fabry both advised detectives no such arrangement had been made or any such compensation discussed.