News



The St. Peter Chaldean Catholic Cathedral is seen Tuesday, March 10, 2026, in El Cajon, Calif. (AP/Gregory Bull)

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The bishop of a small Chaldean Catholic community in the San Diego area has resigned amid charges that he embezzled $270,000 from his parish, Pope Leo XIV announced Tuesday.

Bishop Emanuel Shaleta pleaded not guilty on Monday to 16 felony charges, including money laundering, during a hearing attended by many of his supporters. The hearing followed his arrest Thursday at San Diego International Airport as he was trying to leave the country, according to the San Diego County Sheriff's Office.

Shaleta, 69, is accused of embezzling from the St. Peter Chaldean Catholic Cathedral in El Cajon, east of San Diego.

Last August, someone from Shaleta's church provided a statement and documentation "showing potential embezzlement from the church," the sheriff's office said in a news release.

The Vatican said in its daily bulletin Tuesday that Leo had accepted Shaleta's resignation under the code of canon law for Eastern Rite churches, which allows for the pope to agree if a bishop asks to step down. It also said Iraqi Cardinal Louis Sako retired as patriarch of the global Chaldean Catholic Church, saying he wishes to pursue "prayer, writing and simple service." It's unclear if his retirement is connected to Shaleta's case.

Leo actually accepted Shaleta's resignation in February, but it wasn't announced until this week, according to the Vatican embassy in Washington. The Holy See appears to have waited to announce the decision to avoid interfering with the police investigation.

Prosecutor Joel Madero said the allegations against Shaleta are connected to monthly rental payments of more than $30,000 from a tenant of the church's social hall that allegedly were missing. He said there were discrepancies in church accounts and that Shaleta "provided completely unreasonable tales of where that money was going."

The judge set bail at $125,000 and seized Shaleta's passport. Madero said Shaleta was a flight risk, but the bishop's attorney said Thursday's flight had been planned for a while. Authorities didn't say where he was headed.

During a Feb. 22 Mass, Shaleta addressed allegations against him, saying he has never "abused any penny of the church money."

"On the contrary, I have done my best to preserve and manage the donations of the church properly," he said at the time.

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Shaleta's attorney, Sharon Appelbaum, said she planned to show that the allegations were false. The priests of the Chaldean Catholic Eparchy of St. Peter the Apostle released a statement expressing solidarity with Shaleta.

Shaleta could face 15 years in prison if convicted on all charges, the district attorney's office said. A preliminary hearing is scheduled for April 27.

On Tuesday, the El Cajon parish church's doors were closed and its parking lot was empty. Leo named Bishop Saad Hanna Sirop as a temporary administrator.

Shaleta was ordained a priest of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Detroit in 1984. He was named to the San Diego branch of the Eastern Rite Catholic Church in the U.S. in 2017.

The Chaldean Catholic Church represents more than a million Aramaic-speaking Christians who are primarily from Iraq. While its beliefs align with Roman Catholic doctrine, including the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus, the church maintains its own distinct, ancient Eastern traditions and identity.

Sako, 76, said in a statement that he freely offered his resignation to Pope Leo XIV, who granted it, and that he was leaving "of my own will." As the head of the global

Chaldean Catholic Church, he occasionally clashed with Iraq's political leaders.

The Chaldean Community Foundation estimates there are about 500,000 members in the U.S. with the largest concentration — about 187,000 — in the Detroit area, and the rest concentrated in California and Arizona.

Sako's retirement "will give a chance for new leadership to emerge, hopefully, a younger leader who brings new life into the community," said Fr. Mark Morozowich, who heads the Center for Ukrainian Church Studies at the Catholic University of America in Washington.

The bishop, meanwhile, is the "spiritual father" of the diocese, and Shaleta's resignation is likely to cause turmoil beyond his Southern California parish.

"A bishop facing such serious allegations is a sad moment in the history of these wonderful Christians who are a small community that has historically suffered a lot under Iraqi occupation," he said.