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Embezzlement expert finds hierarchy uninterested

by Robert McClory

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Recent reports concerning a high Vatican official who had saved the church millions of dollars by eliminating "corruption and dishonesty" in various Vatican agencies aroused worldwide interest. But no one found the stories about Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò's reform efforts more fascinating than Michael W. Ryan, a retired U.S. Postal Service security specialist, who has been trying for about 20 years to save the American church the millions it reportedly continues to lose through the embezzlement of Sunday collections and other fund sources.

Their stories bear several similarities. Almost a year ago, Pope Benedict XVI removed Viganò from his post as chief financial officer for the Vatican city-state and sent him to the United States as the new papal nuncio, despite Viganò's protest that the move could undo his clean-up campaign. Ryan's attempt to help the church clean up the loose security policies that drain funds has met with such deep-seated disinterest that he has virtually despaired of getting anywhere. He has recently written a book titled *Nonfeasance: The Remarkable Failure of the Catholic Church to Protect Its Primary Source of Income*. (Nonfeasance is defined in the dictionary as a "failure to do what ought to be done.")

Hearing of Viganò's removal from his Vatican job, Ryan said, "Is it any wonder I'm not getting anywhere with the hierarchy?"

For years, there's been a steady stream of news stories in the media about parish accountants, ushers, parishioners, priests and even diocesan employees stealing large sums. Several days ago, an employee of the Philadelphia archdiocese was charged with embezzling \$1 million over six years. According to the most modest estimates, at least \$89 million donated each year by the people never gets to the intended Catholic cause or recipient due to theft.

In 1988, Ryan began a kind of one-man campaign to stem theft. To have any lasting effect, he stated in his book, "genuinely secure procedures must be mandated from the highest level of church authority. The thought of any retail business with two or more outlets lacking a uniform system for securing its revenue ... is unthinkable in this day and age and has been for the past fifty years or more."

His detailed plan to halt the leaks includes the use of pre-numbered tamper-evident bags for consolidating parish collections, a minimum of three persons present when collections are counted, the use of multiple count teams that are periodically rotated, the restrictive endorsing of checks and the depositing of cash immediately or their placement in pre-numbered bags and locked in a safe with entry only to a few authorized persons. A lapse in any of these steps, Ryan says, is an invitation for disaster.

With the written endorsement of an auxiliary bishop from his home Boston archdiocese, Ryan sent about 100 packets of detailed information on establishing security for parish collections to pastors in the archdiocese's southern region and offered his service in helping implement the plan free of charge. He received not a single reply.

Over the next 13 years, Ryan sent dozens of detailed letters to the presidents of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as well as heads of the bishops' committee on budget and finance and finance. The recipients of Ryan's call for reform included cardinals like Bernard Law and William Keeler as well as bishops and archbishops including Thomas Murphy, Daniel Pilarczyk, Anthony Pilla, Wilton Gregory and Timothy Dolan.

Many of the letters Ryan sent and re-sent were ignored, quickly passed on to other agencies or responded to in generic fashion, referring to Ryan's urgent warnings as "your inquiry" or "this matter." A few dioceses adopted variations of his ideas, but he wondered why at some point the USCCB did not mandate that all dioceses use the available tools to protect the contributions of the Catholic faithful. In reviewing canon law, he found clear declarations that an episcopal conference can draw up rules regarding collections that must be observed by every diocese. Still, he was unable to get any leading bishop to discuss the subject with him.

So in 2001, Ryan turned to the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and its then-head, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. It was in the form of an exhaustive petition, citing Scripture, canon law, a history of his efforts and a presentation of 17 major church embezzlements, 12 of which had been carried out by clergy. This too produced no action other than a suggestion that Ryan pass his ideas on to the Congregation for the Clergy. There, he was informed that the security of collections falls under the sole competency of local bishops. For all his trouble, Ryan had gotten nowhere. Still he forges on, making him perhaps an all-time candidate for determined persistence.

In his book, more than half of which is devoted to his correspondence with the hierarchy, he tells the U.S. bishops, "The irony of this head-in-the-sand stance is that by refusing to acknowledge the systematic nature of Sunday collection embezzlements and to address the malaise on a conference-wide basis, the USCCB is repeating the colossal error that allowed the sexual abuse scourge to last decades longer than it should have. The damage to innocent lives was far worse than it would have been had the [hierarchy] responded correctly when that scourge was first brought credibly to their attention."

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