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Filipinos call for transparency as bishop denies misusing funds

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NCR Today

MANILA, Philippines -- Bishop Jesse Mercado of Parañaque denied Wednesday he misused money donated for victims of calamities and church programs, saying he was open to a probe by the nunciature.

In his statement to reporters at a gathering in Intramuros, Manila, Mercado said all the donations are properly documented and were "promptly turned over to their intended beneficiaries."



On Monday, Rappler reported that priests and lay leaders have complained to Papal Nuncio Archbishop Giuseppe Pinto about Mercado, saying he diverted millions of pesos of specified donations to other uses.

The funds include Sunday Mass collection donations for flood and fire victims and for rehabilitation of Haiti after the catastrophic earthquake there in 2010. The report summarized the questioned funds donated for calamities and special activities table.

Mercado told reporters in urgent cases like typhoons Ondoy (Ketsana, 2009) and Sendong (Washi, 2011), "the diocese even advanced the amounts even before the second collections were mandated."

The bishop said a detailed report was being prepared. He said he was prepared to step down if found to have misappropriated funds.

"I'm always at the service of the church," Mercado said.

Parañaque, south of Manila, was one of five dioceses created from territories in the Manila archdiocese so the church could minister better to the archdiocese's growing population. Created in 2002, the church serves in 51 parishes, quasi-parishes and national shrines in cities of Parañaque, Muntinlupa and Las Pinas.

Mercado's statement said Parañaque diocese is audited annually by the Archdiocese of Manila and receives a 100 percent rating.

Disgruntled clergy

Mercado expressed "sadness" that "five or six" unhappy priests fed media with wrong information. He said some priests could not accept new assignments after a recent reshuffling of diocesan personnel and "used means that are not proper."

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In a separate three-page response to the Rappler report, the bishop noted "distorted" reporting of sharing during a priests' ongoing formation seminar. He questioned the claim that five priests left the ministry "out of frustration and desperation" brought by bad experiences with their bishop.

"Those who left in the first 10 years of the diocese left for personal reasons [e.g., sexual misconduct, fathering children]," Mercado told reporters. The bishop said seminar sharing should have been kept private. One of the priests quoted in the report agreed. He told *NCR* he was surprised to see his private comments published.

Rappler also reported that some priests accused their bishop of sowing division, using double-standard policies and lack of transparency with finances.

For example, former St. Andrew's School director Fr. Bayani Valenzuela was found to have invested more than \$330,000 for the school in 1998 through a faked school board resolution.

When the move was discovered six years later, Valenzuela was only lightly punished and allowed to serve in the United States instead of being charged as recommended by his successor.

He was terminated, put on floating status then "exiled," Mercado said in his statement. Valenzuela is no longer entitled to pension and hospitalization benefits.

"Is this not enough punishment?" Mercado asked.

Tension among priests then escalated. A priest told *NCR* during Holy Week that some confreres considered boycotting their Chrism Mass. In April during the clergy's monthly assembly, two priests

reportedly castigated three confreres who admitted they had gone to the nuncio to complain about the bishop.

The nuncio has reportedly committed to send up the issue to the Congregation for Bishops in Rome.

In case of a probe by the nuncio, Mercado said he was ready.

"I have nothing to hide" from the "representative of the Holy Father," he said.

Laity concern

Monette Hamlin, former Parish Pastoral Council president and a member of the planning board of Ascension of Our Lord Parish, said, "[Church members] give money to the church. We are supposed to support our church. If those collections we give do not reach the people they are intended for, then it is wrong."

She described her parish as "poor" but said parishioners are generous.

"When I learned about unused funds at a meeting last month, I felt sad," she said. "I wrote members of the parish pastoral board a personal note so that they are aware because not all know."

Her parish priest told *NCR* he was offended that Hamlin left him and few board members out of the email loop.

"A board stand on the issue should come after discussing the issue together and voting on it," the priest said.

Internist doctor Erwin Carbeo resigned as president of the Parish Pastoral Council of St. Andrew's parish after the bishop's decision on Valenzuela. Carbeo told *NCR* on Wednesday that since Rappler issued its report, Parañaque diocese parishioners have been inviting him to speak about the problem at forums. He squeezes these into his clinic and school schedule to help enlighten church members.

"I think more than anything else it's a sign of concern, that they are really interested in finding out what's going on. I have known these people to be very much dedicated, and they have a very great love for the church, so that's where they're coming from," Carbeo said.

He and Hamlin stress the issue concerns diocesan finances, not priests' loyalty to the bishop or "disgruntled priests." They agree the proper response is to apply transparency with diocesan finances.

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