NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

From Beacon Hill to 'Bishop Bling,' clergy housing faces new scrutiny

David Gibson Religion News Service | Apr. 3, 2014

Bye-bye, "Bishop Bling." So long, "Pastor Perks." The so-called "Francis effect" may be real, at least when it comes to clerical housing, and could be coming to a church near you.

Pope Francis famously eschewed the trappings of the papal office, including deluxe digs in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace, and the pressure of his example seems to be making itself felt.

Last week, the pontiff accepted the resignation of the most ostentatious offender, Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst of Limburg, Germany, aka "Bishop Bling," who spent a cool $43 million on a swank new residence and office complex while cutting staff.

Now Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta is the latest to feel the peer pressure. On Monday, Gregory responded to anger [1] over his decision to move into a new $2.2 million home by repeatedly apologizing in a letter to his flock and saying he would explore the possibility of selling the mansion and moving into simpler quarters.

Here are some of the latest controversies over clerical lifestyles:

"Bishop Bling" was in a class of his own, spending nearly $500,000 on walk-in closets, nearly $300,000 on a fish tank, more than $200,000 on a spiral staircase and $20,000 on a bathtub. Tebartz-van Elst also spent more than $600,000 on artwork at a time when some dioceses in the U.S. are selling their collections; the seminary of the Philadelphia archdiocese recently announced it would auction off several Thomas Eakins works [2].

Gregory led off his column of apology with this complaint from a parishioner, which sums up the new dynamic: "We are disturbed and disappointed to see our church leaders not setting the example of a simple life as Pope Francis calls for." Gregory explained the rationale behind his move and the purchase of the new home, using a bequest from the nephew of *Gone with the Wind* author Margaret Mitchell. But he conceded the reasons weren't nearly sufficient to justify the move to the 6,000-square-foot house in Atlanta's tony Buckhead neighborhood.

In New Jersey, Newark Archbishop John Myers hasn't opted for penitence, and instead is defending the expenditure [3] of some $500,000 to add a three-story, 3,000-square-foot addition to his already spacious retirement home. The new wing will include an indoor exercise pool, a hot tub, three fireplaces, a library and an elevator.

"Archbishop Myers obviously is not paying any attention to the pope," says Charles Zech, who has studied bishops' spending as faculty director of the Center for Church Management and Business Ethics at Villanova University's business school.

The diocese of Camden, N.J., includes one of the poorest cities in the country, which is partly why Bishop Dennis Sullivan made headlines in January [4] for spending $500,000 to buy a historic 7,000-square-foot mansion with eight bedrooms, six bathrooms, three fireplaces, a library, a five-car garage and an in-ground pool.

The diocese said Sullivan needs the space to entertain dignitaries and donors. Not everyone's buying that.

"This is a joke," parishioner John Miller told the local paper. "Jesus was born in a stable."

Catholics aren't the only ones feeling the heat. Trinity Church in Boston, an Episcopal congregation with a blue-blood heritage and an extensive ministry to the poor, sparked controversy in February for purchasing a $3.6 million Beacon Hill condo for its rector, the Rev. Samuel T. Lloyd III. The church says the outlay is a good investment and won't dent its $30 million endowment, but some in the pews aren't happy.

Last fall, the 33-year-old pastor of Elevation Church in North Carolina, Steven Furtick, came in for criticism for plans to build a 16,000-square-foot estate with 7.5 bathrooms and an electrified gate. Furtick, a Southern Baptist who heads one of the nation's fastest-growing congregations, probably didn't help his cause when he said that the $1.6 million home is "not that great of a house." But the purchase seems to be moving ahead nonetheless.

The Next Step FORWARD [5]

DONATE NOW [5]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [5]

Source URL (retrieved on *07/28/2015 - 15:38*): http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/beacon-hill-bishop-bling-clergy-housing-faces-new-scrutiny

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/73981
[2] http://www.religionnews.com/2014/04/02/seminary-parts-collection-thomas-eakins-portraits/
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/70701/
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/67271
[5] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end