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National Catholic Reporter
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://ncronline.org)

Romanian Catholic priest gets two years in prison for money theft

Catholic News Service | Oct. 31, 2013
Cleveland

A priest of the Romanian Catholic diocese of St. George was sentenced to two years in prison for stealing from the coffers of the parish where he served and from an 89-year-old parishioner who entrusted him to oversee her finances.

Father Andre A. Matthews, 54, former pastor of St. Helena Romanian Catholic Parish in Cleveland, was sentenced Wednesday. He pleaded guilty in June to stealing $176,000 from the parish and more than $100,000 from parishioner Aurelia Papp.

Romanian Bishop John Botean of St. George, based in Canton, Ohio, suspended Matthews from active ministry after his guilty plea. He had been placed on a leave of absence after an investigation into the thefts began in 2011. He subsequently resigned his position with the parish.

Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court Judge Richard McMonagle handed down the sentence after hearing from Papp and the president of the parish council.

McMonagle also ordered Matthews to make restitution to Papp and the parish.

With the court case concluded, Matthews will face a separate church-based ecclesiastical tribunal for trial, the diocese of St. George said in a statement.

"Until the final decision of these ecclesiastical tribunals, Father Matthews remains suspended from priestly ministry. He was and is forbidden to celebrate any sacraments or present himself as a priest," said Fr. Chris Terhes, director of communications for the diocese.

Botean called the allegations a "shock and heartbreak" to all affiliated with the diocese.

"The church owes a debt of gratitude to the parishioners of St. Helena and to everyone who worked hard to bring this situation to light. We also are most grateful to the civil authorities, without whose efforts it would have been very difficult for us to discover the facts of the case," the bishop said.

"This kind of action on the part of a trusted pastor and minister of the church cannot, and will not be tolerated. We deeply regret the pain and loss suffered by so many of our faithful as a result of the actions of one priest. The diocese is looking forward to full restitution to St. Helena of any amounts that the state found at issue and owing to the parish," he added.

During the sentencing hearing, Fabian Barbolovici, president of the St. Helena parish council, told the court that parishioners felt humiliated and betrayed by the years of theft and by learning that the priest also was secretly married and fathered two children, cleveland.com reported.

The parish leader said through an interpreter that Matthews had introduced his wife as his cousin, a poor single mother with two children who later became treasurer of the church. He said parishioners are experiencing "very deep suffering," especially because they placed greater faith in the priest "than politicians or teachers or

policemen."

Assistant County Prosecutor James Gutierrez said Matthews began stealing from Papp after he was removed from ministry. He said the priest used the money to pay a mortgage, credit card charges and college tuition for his children.

Papp, who entered the courtroom in a wheelchair, told McMonagle she had trusted the priest to manage her financial affairs, but that she was "deceived."

St. Helena Parish was established in 1905 and is the first and oldest Romanian Catholic community in the United States.

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