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Priest pleads guilty in embezzlement case

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The former pastor of St. Patrick Catholic Church had taken \$127,000 from the time he started at the church in 2001 until his actions were discovered in January, a prosecutor said today.



The Rev. Stephen Gutsell, left, walks into court this morning with his attorney, James Schaefer.

Stephen J. Gutsell pleaded guilty today to felony theft by deception. Gutsell looked directly at Douglas County Judge W. Russell Bowie and nodded his head as he answered "guilty" to the judge's request for a plea.

After the hearing, Gutsell's attorney, James Schaefer, offered a brief comment on his client's behalf.

"He'd just like to say that he's ashamed of his conduct," Schaefer said. "He knows he was wrong, and he's asking forgiveness from the parishioners and the church."

Gutsell faces one to 20 years in prison and a \$25,000 fine.

Douglas County prosecutor William Ouren said Gutsell had misappropriated the money from three separate church accounts since becoming pastor in June 2001.

The church is at 1412 Castelar St. The parish has about 320 households and 680 parishioners, small when compared with other Omaha parishes.

Sentencing was set for April 4. The judge told Gutsell and Schaefer to be prepared for a restitution hearing before the sentencing.

Schaefer has said that Gutsell used the money on travel and credit cards.

Bill Gaughan, who occasionally attends Mass at St. Patrick but doesn't belong to the parish, came to today's hearing to support Gutsell.

"I feel he, deep in my heart, that he's a good man," Gaughan said. "He provided a lot of spiritual support to me."

Gaughan said he would not like to see Gutsell sent to prison.

Parishioner Tom Cooney, who has been attending St. Patrick since 1990, also came out to support his former pastor. "We all make mistakes," he said.

Gutsell resigned from his post after officials of the Omaha Archdiocese contacted the Omaha Police Department Feb. 1 with the results of an internal audit into the parish's finances.

Gutsell reported his actions to the archdiocese after an audit of the parish's accounts was scheduled and then cooperated with the audit, an archdiocese spokesman said.

Schaefer has established a fund at Wells Fargo Bank to repay the parish. Family and friends of Gutsell have offered to donate, he said.

Gutsell's name is not on the account.

Gutsell grew up in the Blessed Sacrament parish in north Omaha. His brother, the Rev. Michael Gutsell, is a former chancellor of the archdiocese and is pastor at St. Cecilia Cathedral.

The Rev. James M. Buckley, associate pastor at Holy Cross Church, has been transferred to St. Patrick as parish administrator.

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