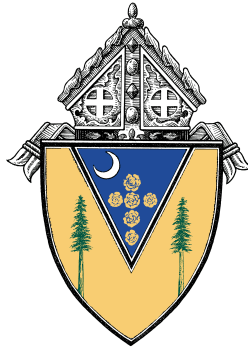


Office of the Bishop

Phone: (707) 566-3325
Email: BpVasa@SRDiocese.org



Diocese of Santa Rosa

P.O. Box 1297
Santa Rosa, California 95402

July 22, 2019
Submitted by Bishop Robert Vasa
Narrative:

Re: Oscar Alejandro Diaz Canchola

Since the discovery of the funds found in Father Oscar Diaz's car on the evening of June 19 I have spent countless hours writing notes, talking and praying about how best to deal with this very challenging and complex problem. Based on the information I have gathered I have drawn conclusions and have now made certain decisions which I sincerely wish I did not have to make. First of all, I need you to know that this is one of the most emotionally draining and difficult situations I have ever encountered. I recognize that Oscar Diaz has been for me and perhaps for many, if not all, of you a loved and trusted priest of the Diocese of Santa Rosa. It is now absolutely clear from solid evidence that he has been systematically stealing from parishes and parishioners for at least the past 15 years.

I enclose an abbreviated announcement which I ask you to make at every Mass this weekend, after the closing prayer before the Final Blessing. Please announce at the time of the homily that there is an important announcement regarding Father Oscar Diaz to be read at the end of Mass so that everyone stays for the announcement.

In order that you may be more fully informed I have prepared for you a lengthier narrative. The Press may be given access to some of the material in this longer narrative and so I do not think anything contained here needs to be considered confidential.

Oscar was born in Mexico. He is 56 years old and was ordained for the Diocese in July of 1994. He celebrated his 25th anniversary as a priest on July 14.

On Wednesday, June 19, 2019 Father Oscar was involved in an automobile accident which caused a broken hip and other injuries. When asked by the medics if there was anything in the car which he needed he said there were bags of money which he described as his salary. Since the volume of cash was very great the police became involved that same Wednesday evening when a hospital employee, who was uncomfortable with the volume of cash which came to the emergency room with Father Oscar, called the police. The police immediately contacted me. I instructed them to take custody of the cash and to account for it for possible criminal prosecution. Some days later when the money was turned over to the Diocese, it was counted and found to total \$18,305.86. This money was contained in the security bags (5-6 of them) associated with the Parish Collections at Resurrection Parish. Some of the bags were still sealed. Some had dates and some indicated whether the collection was a 'first' or 'second' collection. At that moment I decided to allow the police to pursue the case wherever it went and to allow, and even participate in, the criminal prosecution of Father Oscar. After a brief investigation and several interviews, the police determined that the protocols surrounding collection accounting were so poor that it would be very difficult if not impossible to arrive at proof of theft. It was then that the money was returned to the Diocese of Santa Rosa, accounted for, deposited in the Diocesan account and a check written to Resurrection Parish for the entire amount.

I learned of the accident and the presence of the money on Wednesday evening. I was with many of you in Ukiah at our annual Priest Assembly and on Thursday morning, June 20 I informed

those of you present of both the accident and the unexplained cash found in the car. I expressed to you at that time my conviction that I needed to pursue criminal prosecution for this theft. On Friday, June 21, I sent the Pastoral Bulletin in which I encouraged greater attention to the collection counting protocols.

There were and are a whole series of emotions which range from fierce anger, to sadness, to confusion, to shock and even to fear. Now, over four weeks later these same feeling are present. Since Father Oscar had a broken hip the first need was for him to have surgery and to begin a process of physical recuperation. Since he was in the hospital, I did not press him for the details of the apparent theft but did pursue an investigation of the possibility of other stashes of cash.

On Saturday and Sunday, June 22 and June 23 I went to Resurrection Parish where I celebrated Mass for the community and prayed for the well being of Father Oscar. I did not publicly announce anything about the money found in the car but I did talk with a couple of key parishioners about the matter and the concerns which the apparent theft raised. Since I had not yet had a thorough discussion with Father Oscar I did not want to compromise either a possible future police investigation or Father Oscar's reputation.

On Monday morning, June 24 I went to Resurrection Parish to see how the protocols for counting the weekly collection were handled. The persons involved in the counting were and are conscientious but there were some serious gaps in the following of Diocesan procedures. I have often said that, "Only those you trust can steal from you" and that appears to be the case here. None of us had any reason to mistrust Father Oscar and so no one questioned or at least no one had sufficient suspicion to report inconsistencies to the Diocese.

While I was at the Parish on Monday, I was informed that Father Oscar had called and reported to one of the Parish Staff that he had some collection bags in his Parish Office which he had not yet had the opportunity to deposit and that these should be processed and deposited. Staff reported to me that there were 10 to 12 sealed and unsealed Security bags in his office from various collections in 2019. In addition, a stack of mostly 100 dollar bills (\$10,083) was found in a sealed #10 envelope in his desk drawer. Fearing that there might be additional money at the rectory where Father Oscar lived, Monsignor Daniel Whelton and I went to the house and found there a large number of additional sets of the Security bags containing cash. The bags, some of which were dated, show systematic theft at Resurrection Parish from September 2018 through June 2019. The total value of the cash found in the car, the Office and the house is in excess of \$95,000.

There is also documentary evidence that theft, over the course of many years, included an undeterminable number of checks made out to parishes and deposited to Father Oscar's personal account. I will not mention all of the details since there is no justifiable reason for me to do so. I have revealed this much so that you understand that my decision regarding the need for public exposure is not unfounded.

All of this is certainly horribly distressing and so I hope you can understand the anger, outrage, sadness, grief and confusion which this has created for me. I suspect you are now feeling this same range of emotions. My determination to have the police involved and to proceed with a criminal investigation, arrest and charges was secure. On Friday, June 29 Monsignor Whelton and I went to see Father Oscar so that I could inform him of all that we knew up to that point and further inform him of my full intention to have him prosecuted for his (alleged) crimes. At that time I placed him on Administrative Leave essentially removing him from Resurrection Parish and from any and all Diocesan duties. I informed him that I could not see any possibility for future ministry for him in any capacity. While I have wavered on this conclusion over the weeks, I now have now come to the conclusion that I simply cannot expose anyone or any entity of the Diocese

to the strong possibility of additional theft. This is a cause of serious grief for me! Father Oscar admitted that he had taken the Collection bags and had been doing so for some time. He made other admissions as well. I expressed to him my deep sadness, anger and dismay that he had so seriously violated the trust given to him by the Diocese, by the Parishes, and by the parishioners. I was even more determined at that time to proceed with filing charges and proceeding with a criminal prosecution.

The information gathered was again discussed with the police and there was still a reluctance to pursue a criminal investigation. I was advised that the Diocese should hire a Certified Fraud Examiner (CFE) to help put together a report suitable for use in prosecution. Upon inquiry, it was determined that such an examiner could cost the Diocese an additional \$5,000 and possibly more. Based on what I now know such an investigation would require an investigator to go to Cotati, Clearlake, Lakeport, Ukiah and Resurrection. I have no idea what such an investigation would cost. While I am willing to have Father Oscar face prosecution I do not know that I want to expend additional money for a prosecution which brings no additional benefit to either the Diocese or the parishes which are victims of his crimes. I am very interested in determining a full accounting of the theft for possible Insurance purposes and in order to do this I initially thought that a criminal complaint by me and a police investigation would be the only way to access Father Oscar's Banking Records. To his credit, Father Oscar has been very cooperative with me in obtaining the records I need to establish some estimate of the full extent of theft.

In regard to the police, I need to add that they have been most cooperative with and helpful to me and have manifested a strong desire to do what is right. The unintentional delays and necessary requests on their part, however, have allowed me the added time that I have needed to deal with all of the emotions which this discovery has generated for me. The anger, shock, grief, sadness and, confusion are still present but they are slightly diminished. This time has allowed me to look at this from a variety of perspectives and most importantly, it has allowed me to consider this matter in the light of the Gospel, in prayer and in meditation. I do not expect that anyone reading this narrative will immediately have all of their anger, shock, grief, sadness and confusion eliminated, that has not yet happened for me, but I do hope that my 'journey' in this case can be your 'journey' as well. Our journey must be a journey from anger to peace. Our journey must be a journey from shock to understanding. Our journey must be a journey from grief to acceptance. Our journey must be a journey from confusion to compassion. Our journey must be a journey of concern for the spiritual wellbeing of Oscar despite the fact that actions must be taken which are extremely difficult.

My goal is some semblance of justice, reparation, and at least spiritual restitution. Criminal prosecution is not incompatible with the Gospel but our goal must be both mercy and justice. I am not opposed to punishment but after reflection, prayer, discussion and soul searching I have begun to question whether my desire to have police involvement is a genuine desire for justice or much more akin to an angry response. I am still very angry and it is almost impossible to set that anger aside and mercifully discern the path forward. I have asked myself repeatedly what 'good' could come from Father Oscar's prosecution and possible imprisonment. What does 'justice' look like in this particular case?

One reason for pursuing prosecution would be to send a message to any in the Church who may be tempted to do what Father Oscar has done. Thus, punishment is seen as a deterrent. It is the fear of punishment after all which causes most of us to stop at Stop signs and red lights. Yet, Father Oscar can be suitably punished by the Church in a way which will send an equally strong message. He can be, and has been temporarily removed from active ministry. The extent of further

ecclesiastical penalties needs to be determined. What he has done constitutes a grave crime even in the Church. The public exposure, which is a very much abbreviated version of this fuller notice for your benefit is certainly a punishment which sends a strong message. Initially, I had the fear of being accused of 'cover-up' which is very much a theme directed at the Church as She continues to deal with allegations of child sexual abuse. Yet, after further reflection it occurred to me that the transparency which my public parish memo and Press Release slated for Monday, July 22, manifest that I have absolutely no intention or desire to engage in any form of 'cover-up'. In fact, this exposure is probably more comprehensive than the exposure which a trial would bring. The Eighth Commandment prohibits spreading demeaning rumors, whether true or false, but allows exposing the truth even if that truth is unsavory and even ugly provided there is a good and substantial reason for doing so. In this case, I have received the permission of Father Oscar to tell this story. He has read it and while neither he nor I desire to do this, it is nonetheless necessary for the good of the Church. Any other action would expose the Church to future allegations of 'cover-up'.

Until this weekend we have allowed the fact that Father Oscar was recuperating from surgery following his accident to stand as the reason for his absence from public ministry. That has been true. However, people are legitimately asking when he can return to the Parish and I will not fabricate an alternative story. I will not hide this ugly truth. I have no desire to be defamatory. What we, as a Church, do at this juncture needs to be healing, restorative and transparent. This public declaration is a way in which Father Oscar can be made accountable for his actions. Unfortunately, given the length of time over which theft occurred, the variety of methods and the total dollars involved, I cannot envision any possible future ministry. This will need to be discerned further.

It may happen that the individual parishes involved may desire to file charges and pursue prosecution. I could not oppose such an action. It is the parish's right to do so. I would however advocate for mercy.

I have seriously considered this matter from a variety of perspectives but that does not mean that I am convinced that I am right. I know and fully understand that Father Oscar's actions have only indirectly touched me. Others have been more strongly affected, either directly or indirectly. I am aware that you, my brothers in the priesthood, have felt this theft as a violation of fraternity and a betrayal of both trust and friendship. I cannot speak for your ability, desire, or will to forgive. I can only acknowledge that I am aware of these feelings.

Other individuals have been betrayed as well; mostly the lay faithful. Our laity have been asked so often to understand and forgive and I can assure you that I take my responsibility to speak on behalf of the Church, which is all of us, most seriously. I speak in the name of the Church but the individual parishes where Father Oscar has served have a voice as well. I do not envision that any individual parish will seek to pursue criminal prosecution but I fully understand the hurt and anger which undoubtedly will be stirred up in light of this theft and betrayal. I ask you to try to turn this moment from one of hurt and anger to a desire for healing, compassion and ultimately forgiveness. I am not negating the seriousness of the crime, I am suggesting a way forward which is more fully consistent with a good and merciful God.

I assure you, brothers, I wish I could see another, more merciful, way to deal with this horribly distressing situation but full public disclosure seems to be absolutely necessary.