

# Former vicar general pleads guilty to theft charges

By Dino Orsatti

*Editor*

STEUBENVILLE — Jefferson County Judge Michelle Miller sentenced Msgr. Kurt H. Kemo, former diocesan vicar general and chief financial officer, to six months in jail at the Eastern Ohio Correctional Center and ordered him to pay nearly \$300,000 to the Diocese of Steubenville as restitution, after pleading guilty April 28 to felony theft charges.

Judge Miller ordered a pre-sentencing evaluation before Msgr. Kemo's incarceration begins.

The restitution to the diocese represented \$96,000 in unauthorized bonuses and credit card charges taken by Msgr. Kemo from diocesan funds, and nearly \$193,000 taken from the Propagation of the Faith funds.

Msgr. Kemo told the judge "I'm very, very sorry," when asked to reflect on his actions.

Msgr. Kemo, 64, could have received up to nine years in prison for the six charges he admitted to committing. His sentencing will be followed by two years of community control sanctions.

Following the sentencing, Msgr. Kemo paid the restitution in full to the diocese. He also has agreed to cooperate with the Jefferson County prosecuting attorney and law enforcement officers in connection with a continuing investigation into the matter of possible mismanagement and/or misappropriation of funds and property owned by the Diocese of Steubenville and its related entities.

On May 26, 2020, Diocese of Steubenville Bishop Jeffrey M. Monforton said due to the scandal caused by financial irregularities during the time in which he served as vicar general and chief financial officer, Msgr. Kemo resigned as pastor of Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady of Lourdes Parishes, Wintersville, and was given a leave of absence for pastoral ministry.

Assistant County Prosecutor Frank Bruzzese said Msgr. Kemo worked closely with convicted former comptroller David A. Franklin to falsely represent the financial situation of the diocese to the bishop and the finance council and pay themselves and a few select diocesan employees unauthorized bonuses.

The new diocesan chief financial officer and an audit uncovered irregularities in the finance department after Franklin retired in 2017 and the bishop hired an independent firm to conduct a forensic investigation. The Diocese of Steubenville self-reported missing payroll taxes that had been collected but Franklin never turned over to the IRS as well as local and state taxing agencies. The diocese also provided the Jefferson County Prosecutor's office with the results of the 2018 forensic audit and other information that initiated the criminal investigation which led to the indictment of Franklin.

Franklin pleaded guilty to federal charges last July and state charges in February to the crimes he committed in the finance department from 2004-17. Franklin agreed to cooperate with prosecutors for the state of Ohio in their investigation as to whether anyone else was responsible for the crimes. Bruzzese said this evidence helped investigators get a clearer understanding of the financial mismanagement in the diocese which led to Msgr. Kemo's guilty plea. Judge Miller ordered Franklin to serve his federal sentence first and then the remaining time, up to 18 months in an Ohio prison.

On April 28, Bishop Monforton suspended Msgr. Kemo from priestly ministry and revoked his faculties. The bishop said Msgr. Kemo cannot carry out any ministry or present himself as a priest during the suspension.

Msgr. Kemo, who currently resides in Covington, Kentucky, was ordained as a priest in the Diocese of Steubenville by Bishop Albert H. Ottenweller in 1983. Msgr. Kemo also served as administrator of the diocese in 2011 for about a year, after Bishop R. Daniel Conlon was installed bishop of the Diocese of Joliet, Illinois, and before Bishop Monforton was installed as the fifth bishop of the Steubenville Diocese.

## Bishop Monforton provides a victim's statement

STEUBENVILLE — **Diocese of Steubenville Bishop Jeffrey M. Monforton's statement:**

Thank you, Your Honor.

At Mr. Franklin's sentencing hearing I attended a couple of months ago, I borrowed Pope Francis' reference that the church is a field hospital as we reach out to those in greatest of need, those in need of healing and those on the peripheries of society. This ministry requires financial resources, resources that we were denied for years. In addition to the diocesan outreach, the Society for the Propagation of the Faith also fell victim to the illegal actions. The society serves missionaries and the poorest of the poor throughout this world of ours.

As the bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Steubenville, I express my gratitude to those who exercised due diligence from the preparation of the forensic accounting investigation to the state of Ohio's investigation into Msgr. Kemo's actions, including the present action by our local judicial system.

What adds to the outrage is that a cleric was involved. As mentioned before, diocesan chancery positions were eliminated and austerity measures employed in each department resultant of financial misinformation, irregularities and lack of transparency. To put it bluntly, people lost their jobs.

Many people, locally and diocesan-wide, have had their trust in the church compromised. We are all too aware it is easy and relatively quick to lose one's trust, but the arduous and longer road is in the work to regain that very same trust. This is all the more true in small communities like our own.

The Diocese of Steubenville, this Appalachian field hospital, has endeavored on this long road in order to be effective in sharing the faith, hope and charity of Christ with all whom we encounter. Our success as credible missionary disciples demands nothing less. Thank you.