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LOCAL

Rev. Jonathan Wehrle, retired priest charged with embezzlement, died Tuesday, bishop says



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LANSING – Rev. Jonathan Wehrle died Tuesday afternoon, according to the leader of the Catholic Diocese of Lansing.

Wehrle, who was 69, died at 3 p.m., Bishop Earl Boyea tweeted Tuesday evening.

The diocese said in a statement that Wehrle had been ill "for some time" and his death was not related to the current coronavirus outbreak.

"Upon the death of Father Wehrle I am sure all can unite in praying for the repose of his soul and that solace be brought to those who mourn him," Boyea added in the statement. "May he rest in peace."

Funeral services have yet to be announced, the diocese added, but likely will be limited to immediate family because of restrictions in place during the outbreak.

Wehrle was ordained in 1978 and spent the next 10 years at parishes that included St. Mary Star of the Sea in Jackson, Holy Redeemer in Burton, and Sacred Heart in Hudson.

In the late '80s and '90s, he was key in founding St. Martha Parish in Okemos, literally helping to build it from the ground up.

The diocese tapped Wehrle specifically to help build the parish.

“Father Jonathan Wehrle’s huge frame fairly bursts with enthusiasm for his job — establishing a Catholic parish in the Okemos area where none existed before,” State Journal Reporter Helen Clegg wrote in July 1988.

Wehrle served St. Martha's until being put on administrative leave in 2017 when church officials began investigating parish finances.

Eventually, Wehrle faced six felony counts of embezzlement of \$100,000 or more, with authorities saying he had taken more than \$5 million from his parish.

He had yet to face trial because of a pending appeal.

It wasn't immediately clear what Wehrle's death means for a related civil lawsuit.

What caused the delays in his case?

The criminal trial was first rescheduled in August 2018 when Wehrle's original attorney withdrew from the case after Michigan State Police found about \$63,000 in Wehrle's home, made up of bundles of bills wrapped in paper bands stamped with the words: "For deposit only - St. Martha Parish and School."

Builder, priest, accused embezzler: Who is the Rev. Jonathan Wehrle?

The most recent delay followed Ingham County Circuit Court Judge Joyce Draganchuk's denial of a request from Wehrle's attorneys to suppress the discovery of that money as evidence.

Draganchuk paused the criminal case after Wehrle and his attorneys appealed her October 2018 decision to the Michigan Court of Appeals. The state's appeals court denied the request.

Read more: Rev. Jonathan Wehrle embezzlement case began nearly 2 years ago. Here's why it's taking so long

Wehrle's lawyers appealed to the state Supreme Court in February 2019. That court bumped the matter back down to the appeals court. A brief from Wehrle's lawyers was due to that court on Wednesday.

Diocese of Lansing's insurer in limbo

The appeal also delayed progress in a civil lawsuit the Diocese of Lansing's insurance company filed against Wehrle in 2018.

The Princeton Excess and Surplus Lines Insurance Corp. claimed to have paid out roughly \$2.5 million to the diocese to cover its losses when it filed the lawsuit in March 2018.

During a status conference in February 2019, Wehrle's lawyers asked that the civil case be put on hold until there was a resolution in the criminal case. There have been multiple status conferences since then.

A recent order in that case called for the payment of 2018 and 2019 taxes on Wehrle's estate in Williamston.

This story will be updated

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