

# The priest, his gambling and trouble at Blessed Sacrament

Father Joe LeClair had cash advances at Lac-Leamy of more than \$137,000; Church audit investigates financial irregularities

BY MEGHAN HURLEY AND ANDREW DUFFY, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN    APRIL 16, 2011



Father Joseph LeClair, inside Blessed Sacrament Church in the Glebe, photographed for a Citizen story in 2009.

**Photograph by:** Wayne Cuddington, The Ottawa Citizen

Father Joseph LeClair, a renowned Ottawa priest who made Blessed Sacrament Parish one of the most successful in the city, received more than \$137,000 in cash advances on his credit card at Casino du Lac-Leamy during 2009 and 2010, the Citizen has learned.

A newspaper investigation reveals LeClair racked up personal credit card bills of more than \$490,000 in those same years.

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The bulk of LeClair's credit card debt was incurred through the use of cash advances. In total, he received more than \$389,000 in cash

advances in 2009 and 2010, according to documents obtained by the newspaper.

LeClair repaid Visa more than \$424,000 during those years.

How he could afford to repay that much is not known, other than the fact that as a church pastor, LeClair earns a net salary of \$24,400. He also receives money for officiating at weddings, funerals, baptisms and marriage preparation courses.

The Citizen has also learned of lax financial controls at Blessed Sacrament.

Earlier this year, an "internal review" was launched by the Ottawa diocese to investigate financial irregularities at the church.

That review, by the firm Deloitte and Touche LLP, took place in early March. Auditors raised questions about \$250,000 worth of cheques issued to LeClair from church accounts between 2006 and 2010. LeClair had the authority during those years to issue a cheque, even to himself, without another signature.

Many of the transactions had no receipts or other documentation to support them.

The auditors subsequently recommended a number of measures to improve financial accountability at the church, a registered charity. For one thing, cheques must now be counter-signed.

Diocesan officials refused Friday to comment on that review, which was described as ongoing.

"What I'm going to advise you is we have not completed our review," said Msgr. Kevin Beach, Vicar General of the Ottawa Archdiocese.

"It's an internal review," he added, "so it's not something I would normally comment on and certainly not to the press."

LeClair lives in decided comfort. Blessed Sacrament's rectory features a hot tub, a fireplace and a 42-inch flat-screen TV in its master bedroom.

The rectory was once featured on the Glebe home tour and boasts an Irish-themed TV room and an Italian-themed dining room.

LeClair drives a Volkswagen Eos, a convertible that starts at \$36,000 for a 2011 model.

LeClair refused Friday to speak to the Citizen about his gambling, credit card spending or Blessed Sacrament's finances.

He has been aware of the newspaper's investigation for three months, and has called the Citizen several times to express his concern and to deny any wrongdoing.

"I'm a good person in Ottawa. I do good work," he said on Jan. 25th. "The charities that I give to are numerous to no end. My books are open to absolutely anyone. I have accountants and I am accountable and I would never, never take money from my church."

On Friday, two Citizen reporters went to review the church's financial statements with Herve Dejordy, chair of Blessed Sacrament's finance committee. The meeting had been arranged one day earlier.

That meeting was interrupted by LeClair who told Dejordy not to allow reporters to review Blessed Sacrament's financial statements.

LeClair said the reporters should not be at the church and should be speaking only to his lawyer.

Asked by the Citizen how he could afford to repay more than \$424,000 to Visa in two years, LeClair said, "I still think you should be talking to my lawyer."

He added: "Whoever has the information that you're alleging has created a scenario that is totally illegal."

Asked if he had another source of income that would allow him to repay \$424,000, LeClair said, "What I just said is I want to know who stole from my office, my personal papers, private papers. And I want my lawyer to deal with that."

LeClair's lawyer, Ian Stauffer, told the Citizen that he was worried about an orchestrated attempt to embarrass LeClair.

"There is a concern that there are one or more parishioners out there who would like to disgrace Father Joe," he said.

While Stauffer said LeClair may have gambled -"I don't doubt for a minute that Father Joe has had his time at the casino" -he stressed that his client is an honourable man.

"From Father Joe's perspective, the auditors have exonerated Father Joe," he said.

Stauffer said he also spoke with Msgr. Beach on Friday. "He (Beach) has no concerns about Father Joe in terms of any kind of criminality, that there is simply no evidence that he was aware of that Father Joe is benefiting from any money that may not be properly accounted for at this point."

Church finance committees are supposed to meet three or four times a year to review parish finances, Msgr. Beach told the Citizen.

At Blessed Sacrament, the finance committee did not convene at all last year as a group, but members did meet informally with each other and sometimes with LeClair, Dejordy said.

Dejordy said he considered himself the church bookkeeper rather than a financial comptroller, who would have an oversight role. He was unaware of LeClair's gambling or credit card totals, Dejordy said.

LeClair has told others that he won the lottery in 2009. But lottery corporations across the country, canvassed by the Citizen, have no record of Joseph LeClair winning a major prize.

LeClair is a beloved figure at Blessed Sacrament. And there's no denying he's a gifted priest: a charismatic storyteller and an energetic community-builder who greets people on the steps of the Glebe church as they depart mass each Sunday. He is the kind of priest who offers his sermon, not from a lectern, but from the front of the church.

"Have a good week folks," he'll say in ending a mass.

"You too, Father," the congregation will reply.

On a typical weekend, Blessed Sacrament hosts five masses. At each one, ushers send collection baskets down the church's polished oak pews on long poles.

Before the internal review, ushers put the offertory proceeds in the second-floor chapel. The collection consists of cheques, cash and change. Regular parishioners use envelopes to make their contributions in order to receive a tax receipt for them.

The proceeds were placed into five canvas bags, and put into a closet in LeClair's unlocked office in the rectory, his living quarters attached to the church. The money was rarely counted on Sunday.

Instead, the money was usually counted Monday or Tuesday by two volunteers. It was often not deposited until mid-week.

Msgr. Beach said churches are instructed to deposit collection money "as soon as possible." "Some parishes have night deposits, some parishes do it on Monday or the first day the parish is open," he said.

The money is supposed to be kept in a safe before being deposited in a bank.

Documents obtained by the Citizen offer a picture of some of Le-Clair's casino trips.

LeClair's personal Visa bill for November, 2010 -it covers the period between Oct. 15 and Nov. 15 - reveals he made four trips to the Casino du Lac-Leamy.

During his first visit on Oct. 16, he made six trips to the casino's automated banking machine to obtain cash advances. Each time, he obtained \$1,047.50. In that one night, he withdrew \$6,285, more than onequarter of his net annual salary.

On Oct. 18, he was back at the casino and received another \$2,095 in cash advances.

Four days later, LeClair returned to the casino and took three more cash advances, this time for \$2,731.75.

On Nov. 1, LeClair again went to Lac-Leamy. On eight separate occasions that night, he returned to the ABM for cash advances on his credit card. He withdrew \$9,427.50.

In that one-month billing period alone, LeClair accumulated credit card debts of \$20,539.25 at the casino, all through cash advances.

In a one-year period ending in December 2010, LeClair had received \$136,084 in cash advances on his credit card. Those advances made up the bulk of his total year-to-date bill of \$151,020.02.

The previous year shows a similar pattern. In a one-year period ending in December 2009, LeClair had taken 168 cash advances on his Visa worth \$253,766.02. It made up the bulk of the \$342,907.49 charged to his credit card in 2009.

It's not known how LeClair spent all of the money he obtained through cash advances in those years.

What the newspaper can confirm is that at least \$137,000 was withdrawn at the casino in 2009 and 2010.

By late 2010, even as the church calendar neared Christmas -one of the holiest and busiest seasons of the year -LeClair couldn't resist a foray to the casino.

It was late on the evening of Dec. 23 that LeClair came out the front door of the Blessed Sacrament Church rectory as a Citizen reporter watched. Although it was -10 C outside, he was dressed only in a longsleeved white shirt and blue jeans. He didn't wear a jacket.

It was around 11 p.m. when Le-Clair loudly greeted a cab driver and climbed into the warm back seat.

Inside the casino, LeClair made his way to an ATM machine to withdraw money. He then sat down at a slot machine and, for the next two hours, gambled in solitude.

He would repeatedly visit the ATM on that Christmas Eve morning, then return to the slot machine, which faced the gaming tables. At about 1: 30 a.m., LeClair quickly got out of his chair, threw his hand in the air, and walked away.

He went to the ATM 10 times that evening and gambled thousands of dollars.

Later that day, he would lead a Christmas Eve mass to a church packed with parishioners.

Msgr. Beach would not say if the diocese has offered LeClair any help to deal with his gambling: "I'm not going to comment on personnel issues," he said.

Ottawa police are aware of financial concerns at Blessed Sacrament Church, but say they haven't investigated because no one has made a formal complaint.

LeClair, 53, who bears a passing resemblance to Paul McCartney, enjoys rock star status among Ottawa's clergy. He has officiated at the weddings of former mayor Larry O'Brien and Senators defenceman Chris Phillips. He hosts a radio show and has been the subject of flattering features in the Citizen and on the CBC.

Born and raised in a fishing village on Prince Edward Island, Le-Clair grew up in a family of nine children. He has talked publicly about the pain of his father's alcoholism. He has also discussed his own battle with depression.

"I think why I became so sensitive to mental health is myself having come very close to burnout," he said in 2009 upon receiving an award for destigmatizing mental illness "I know what a panic attack is, what anxiety can do to your life. I thought that was the Lord's way of saying I need to make that my mission in life as I fully appreciate what people suffer when they go through this kind of thing."

LeClair worked as an elementary school teacher and social services worker before being ordained a priest 25 years ago.

He served in several Ottawa churches before being assigned 14 years ago to the then-struggling parish of Blessed Sacrament.

The majestic church, built in 1931, had fallen on hard times. Its attendance was dwindling. "It was sort of the old cliché of firing a cannon through a room and not hitting anyone," LeClair told the Citizen in a 2004 profile.

But Father Joe authored a remarkable rebirth at Blessed Sacrament. He reached out to neighbourhoods beyond the Glebe and recruited Catholic students from Carleton University. He made music a central part of his services.

Thousands come to the church every weekend now.

On a recent Sunday, before a packed house, LeClair offered a homily about the corrosive effects of guilt. As is often the case, he began with a story. He told parishioners about the time, as a boy, that he took his young sister for a bike ride while angry about the fact he had been asked to babysit.

Her foot caught in the spokes of his bike and she pitched onto the ground, badly damaging her teeth and gums. For many years, he said, the guilt he felt affected his relationship with his sister.

But it was only by confronting that guilt, he said, and dealing with its source that he rebuilt their closeness.

LeClair counselled his parishioners not to similarly allow their own guilt to interfere in their spiritual life. He urged everyone in the church to have a quiet, honest conversation with God.

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[Previous](#)

[Next](#)





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