

# BishopAccountability.org

---

## **Principal Jailed for Stealing from Catholic School** Court Rejects Abuse Claim As Reason for Embezzlement

By Linda Stein  
The Times  
February 20, 2008

<http://www.nj.com/news/times/index.ssf?/base/news-4/1203516343173640.xml&coll=5>

FREEHOLD — A former principal of Catholic high schools in Hamilton and Burlington County was sentenced to five years in prison Friday for stealing \$414,848 from Holy Cross High School in Delran.

Joseph Lemme, 50, of Wall Township, claimed in his defense that he had been sexually abused repeatedly while studying as a seminary student at three Catholic institutions, and that a court dismissal of his claims of abuse drove him to embezzle from Holy Cross, where he was working at the time.

Lemme alleged that the sexual abuse continued from his early teens until after high school graduation.

He had pleaded guilty to two theft charges in December for stealing \$415,848 from Holy Cross, according to the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office. Lemme must also repay the money, Superior Court Judge Francis P. DeStefano ordered.

In Hamilton, Lemme worked at McCorristin High School for seven years before taking the principal's job at Holy Cross in 2002.

An investigation showed that Lemme had taken money intended for dances, trips and other school activities between June 5, 2003 and Nov. 30, 2006.

After making deposits into a personal account, Lemme withdrew the funds for his own use. The Diocese of Trenton management never authorized Lemme to open a personal bank account for the deposit of school funds, officials said.

The investigation further revealed that Lemme falsely represented to school administrators that he paid for furniture and other equipment with his personal American Express card. Lemme had sought reimbursement and provided an altered transaction statement to substantiate his claim.

Lemme was first suspended then fired from the school after he was charged with the thefts.

Defense lawyer Michael Pappa said he told the judge about Lemme's past to try to explain why he had stolen the money.

"This was not a garden variety embezzlement," Pappa said. "It was more deeply rooted than that. He was molested as a teenager at a seminary. He went there to become a priest and within weeks going there, at 13, he was abused. The abuse continued for three years. He reported it and, rather than having the priest be punished, he was thrown out of the seminary. So he has had a lot of issues since age 13."

But after graduating from high school, Lemme still wanted to be a priest and went to a different seminary where he was allegedly abused again, Pappa said.

A lawsuit that Lemme filed against the church over the alleged sexual abuse was dismissed in 2002 because it was brought beyond the statute of limitations. It was after that dismissal, that he began to steal from Holy Cross, Pappa said.

Lemme "is extremely remorseful. He apologized. A psychologist diagnosed him with post traumatic stress disorder from the abuse. He was a terrific teacher, a terrific administrator, dedicated to his students and the school. It's just a paradox."

Pappa added, "It's a horrible tragedy. Joe made the wrong choices as an adult but what choice did he have when he was 13? It makes for a life of confusion, regret, guilt — everything."

Rayanne Bennett, a spokeswoman for the Diocese of Trenton, said, "Any victim of abuse anywhere is deserving of our compassion and our prayers. What he is not entitled to, is to steal money from innocent victims."

She noted that none of the abuse that Lemme alleges took place within the local diocese.

"We really think his conduct was indefensible," Bennett added. "It's true, he was well-respected and admired in the Holy Cross community. What he's done has hit that community very hard. We hope his sentence will bring closure and healing. The rationale he's provided doesn't hold up."

The case was prosecuted in Monmouth because Lemme deposited the funds into a bank within that jurisdiction.

"Lemme's deliberate and substantial theft profoundly affected Holy Cross High School and its students," said Luis A. Valentin, Monmouth County prosecutor. "This selfish criminal behavior is appropriately punished by the period of incarceration imposed at today's sentencing."

Assistant Prosecutor Barbara Suppa prosecuted the case.

*Linda Stein can be reached at [lstein@njtimes.com](mailto:lstein@njtimes.com) or (609) 989-6437.*