

Clergy residences under scrutiny

by [David Gibson](#) in the [April 30, 2014](#) issue

Bye-bye, Bishop Bling. So long, Pastor Perks. The so-called Francis effect may be real, at least when it comes to clerical housing, and could be coming to a church near you.

Pope Francis famously eschewed the trappings of the papal office, including deluxe digs in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace, and the force of his example seems to be making itself felt.

The pontiff accepted in March the resignation of the most ostentatious offender, Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst of Limburg, Germany, also known as "Bishop Bling," who spent \$43 million on a swank new residence and office complex while cutting staff.

The latest to feel peer pressure is Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta. On March 31, Gregory responded to anger over his move into a new \$2.2 million home with apologies to his flock. After meeting April 5 with archdiocesan advisory councils, Gregory announced he would move to simpler quarters in May and sell the mansion.

Here are some of the latest controversies over clerical lifestyles:

Tebartz-van Elst was in a class of his own, spending nearly \$500,000 on walk-in closets, nearly \$300,000 on a fish tank, more than \$200,000 on a spiral staircase, and \$20,000 on a bathtub. He also spent more than \$600,000 on artwork.

Archbishop Wilton Gregory led off a written column of apology with this complaint from a parishioner, which sums up the new dynamic: "We are disturbed and disappointed to see our church leaders not setting the example of a simple life as Pope Francis calls for."

Gregory explained the rationale behind his move and the purchase of the new home, using a bequest from the nephew of *Gone with the Wind* author Margaret Mitchell. But he conceded the reasons weren't nearly sufficient to justify the move to the 6,000-square-foot house in Atlanta's tony Buckhead neighborhood.

In Newark, New Jersey, Archbishop John Myers hasn't opted for penitence and instead is defending the expenditure of some \$500,000 to pay for a three-story, 3,000-square-foot addition to his already spacious retirement home. The new wing will include an indoor exercise pool, a hot tub, three fireplaces, a library, and an elevator.

"Archbishop Myers obviously is not paying any attention to the pope," said Charles Zech, who has studied bishops' spending as faculty director of the Center for Church Management and Business Ethics at Villanova University's business school.

The Diocese of Camden, New Jersey, includes one of the poorest cities in the country, which is partly why Bishop Dennis Sullivan made headlines in January for spending \$500,000 to buy a historic 7,000-square-foot mansion with eight bedrooms, six bathrooms, three fireplaces, a library, a five-car garage, and a pool. The diocese said Sullivan needs the space to entertain dignitaries and donors. Not everyone's buying that. "This is a joke," parishioner John Miller told the local paper. "Jesus was born in a stable."

Catholics aren't the only ones feeling the heat. Trinity Church in Boston, an Episcopal congregation with a blue-blood heritage and an extensive ministry to the poor, sparked controversy in February for purchasing a \$3.6 million Beacon Hill condo for its rector, Samuel T. Lloyd III. The church says the outlay is a good investment and won't dent its \$30 million endowment, but some in the pews aren't happy.

Last fall, Steven Furtick, the 33-year-old pastor of Elevation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, came in for criticism for plans to build a 16,000-square-foot estate with 7.5 bathrooms and an electrified gate. Furtick, a Southern Baptist who heads one of the nation's fastest-growing congregations, probably didn't help his cause when he said that the \$1.6 million home is "not that great of a house." But the purchase seems to be moving ahead nonetheless. —RNS

This article was edited April 10, 2014.