

Daily Dispatch

OUR OPINION

From mouths of babes

WHAT a shock! Our story headlined *Priest arrested for baby milk 'scam'*, about a 67-year-old Catholic priest allegedly selling baby formula meant to be given out free to underprivileged infants from the church's Queenstown mission, evoked gasps of surprise from members of the public reading the newspaper in the foyer of the Daily Dispatch's building in East London on Friday.

They were taken aback for several reasons. First, this theft from the most vulnerable members of the poor was allegedly being perpetrated by somebody the community at large viewed as a person of moral fortitude and leadership. And it was taking place at a mission station, *nogal*.

Second, the priest indicated that the formula had been sold in such a manner for 24 long years, and that his predecessor had also sold the milk formula.

Third, 1 400 400g tins of baby formula were found neatly packed on the premises of the mission station. If one does the math – the tins were being sold for R35 each – this adds up to a tidy R49 000. Who knows what the total will be for the full 24 years?

As if that isn't enough a second Catholic priest was arrested in Dutywa a few days later for doing exactly the same thing. In this case over 1 600 tins of milk formula were found in the church.

Now, there is all sorts of conjecture about how such a practice came to be established and why it has been going on for so long. Were the priests knowingly selling milk meant to be free? Was the money perhaps being ploughed into the church? Were others involved and perhaps pocketing kickbacks?

These are however, not matters for us to debate but for the courts and the investigators to examine. What we can do is give the authorities their due – they have done a sterling job so far in dealing with what appears to be a theft, literally from the mouths of babes.

What is disappointing is that the church has – wittingly or unwittingly – been involved. Whether people are believers or not, many still look to the church and its members as agents of virtues like truthfulness and honesty, compassion and servant leadership. This is particularly so at a time when many feel cast adrift in a sea of politically-linked corruption. If the church cannot offer hope and compassion when people are desperate for some stability, then where else are people to look?

Having said that, we must stress we do not carry a brief for the church. Nor are we, by covering these stories, attempting to paint the church in a negative light. We believe the church is no different to any other organisation when it comes to being scrutinised or held accountable.

What is clear, is that whether wittingly or unwittingly implicated in the selling of free milk, the Catholic Church in the Eastern Cape must ensure its house is in order if it wishes to guard its reputation.