

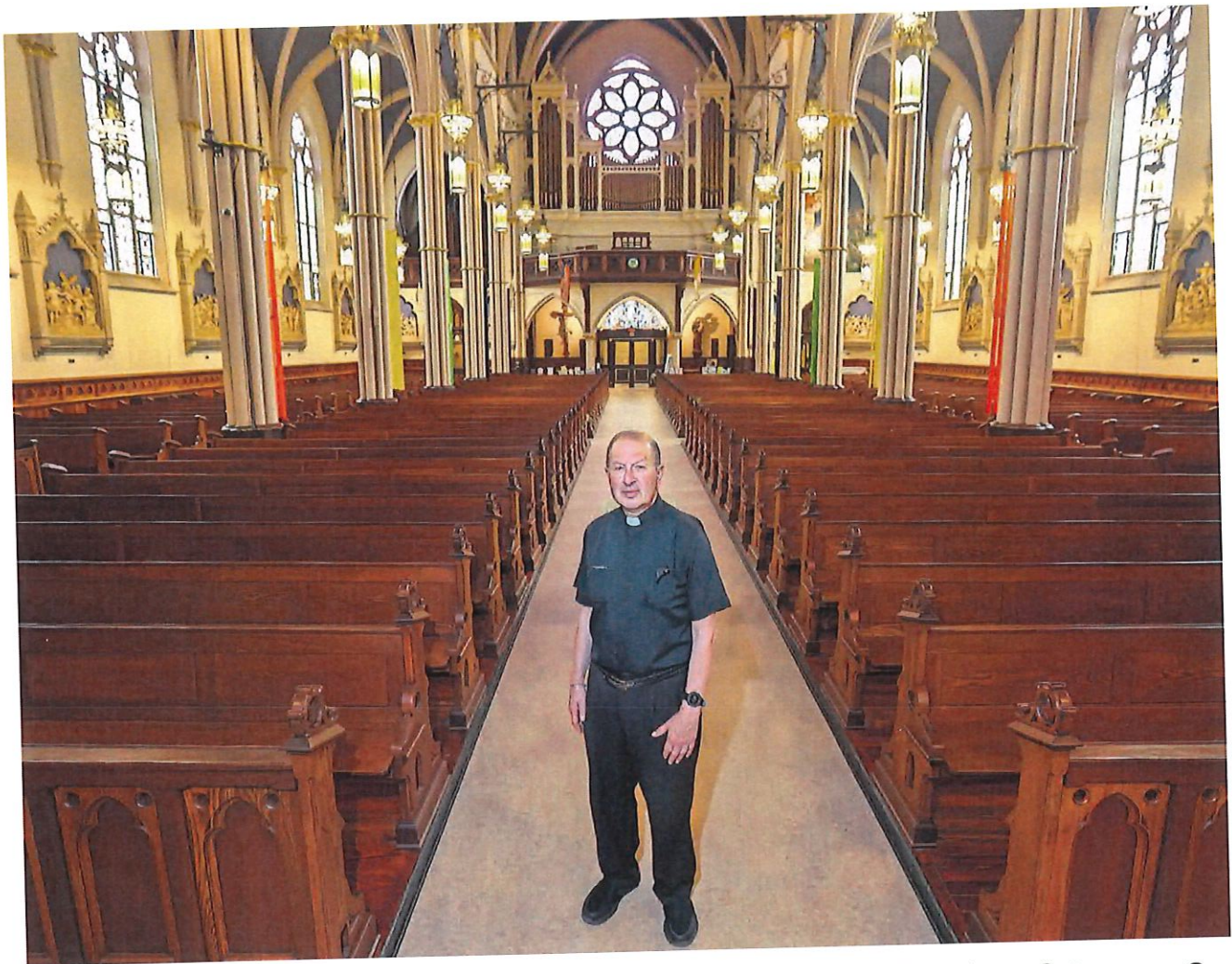
## NEWS

### BAMBOOZLED

# **FedEx 'lied' and messed with the wrong church. The pastor fought back.**

*"I feel obligated to watch every penny for the people who share their resources with us and expect good stewardship," he said.*

**Karin Price Mueller** *For The Star-Ledger*



**The Rev. Alex Santora of The Church of Our Lady of Grace & St. Joseph refused to pay a bill that was more than \$2,000 over the quoted price.**

*Photos by Ed Murray, for The Star-Ledger*



The Rev. Alex Santora was doing a good deed when the big truck arrived in Hoboken.

The driver parked at Santora's church's garage in January. He loaded 13 boxes of sheet music and



hymnals as planned and departed with a generous donation to poor, rural congregations.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Until the stunning FedEx bill arrived. The company had quoted The Church of Our Lady of Grace & St. Joseph \$836.24 to send the plastic-wrapped pallet to a nonprofit in Milwaukee. But the corporate behemoth billed the historic church a whopping \$3,277.79 instead.

“We were flabbergasted by the invoice,” Santora said, anger creeping into his normally calm, smooth voice. “(We) would never have shipped with them if this was told to us upfront.”

Santora is a forgiving guy. But money is money. Even a man of the cloth has his limits.

“We are nonprofit and have to watch expenses,” Santora said. “I refuse to give in to extortion.”

The Jersey City native and longtime faith columnist for The Jersey Journal and NJ.com fiercely defends his church, a local landmark with roots dating to 1851.

Our Lady of Grace & St. Joseph previously donated a pallet’s worth of sheet music and hymnals to the same group last year, paying about \$1,000 for a different company to ship the items.

The church wanted to donate more and weighed the second donation at 414 pounds. It searched for the best shipping price and provided the weight and all necessary information to FedEx, church officials said.

The church offered a credit card to pay FedEx the quoted price of \$836.24. But FedEx said it would send a bill.

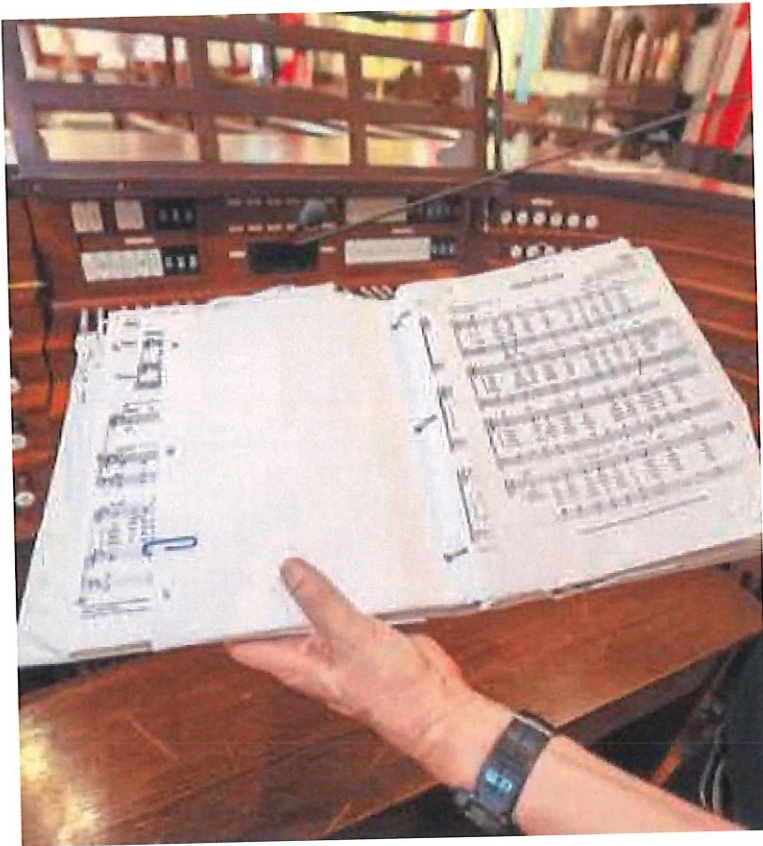
And did it ever. The invoice included a fuel surcharge, a limited access pickup charge and other add-ons — none of which the church was told about ahead of time.

The church has never skipped out on a legitimate bill, Santora said. But this one was different. “They lied to us,” Santora said, “made up claims that were untrue.”





**From left, Marge Parry, church auditor; the Rev. Alex Santora, pastor; and Socorro Martinez, office manager, stand in The Church of Our Lady of Grace & St. Joseph.**



**The church sent a large shipment of sheet music and hymnals to an organization that distributes them to poor churches.**

Church officials felt it was their duty to fight back.

Church auditor Marge Parry called FedEx and got the bill reduced to \$1440.71. But that was still \$604.47 above the quoted price.

The church paid \$836.34 — the original quote — in March, and then officials spent the next several months trying to get FedEx to change its mind.

They were passed from rep to rep and never got the same person on the phone or by email.



“The thing that’s the most frustrating was the bureaucratic hydra that you have to deal with,” Santora said. “I don’t want to waste our people’s money.”

Along the way, FedEx tried to justify its surprise price hike. In an email, it said quotes are just an estimate and final charges are determined at the time of shipping — something no one at the church said they’d heard before.

And while the limited access pickup charge indicated there were obstacles in retrieving the pallet, Santora denied it. He said he witnessed the pickup, which was done by a third-party company hired by FedEx, and it was “effortless.”

Parry shared photos with FedEx to show there is no restricted access. She said the company told her later it was an automatic fee added to invoices for schools, universities and religious institutions — places where access is often limited.

But why add a fee automatically if it may not apply to every location?

A letter sent to FedEx chief Raj Subramaniam in June went unanswered.

But a few days later, the church received a different kind of response: a collection agency demanded

\$2,019.78, including an eye-popping \$1,415.31 of unexplained “fees” on top of the alleged \$604.47 debt.

“Why should we pay money we never agreed to pay?” said Santora, who has guided his congregation for two decades, including through a merger in 2008. “It’s a matter of justice.”

He asked Bamboozled for help.

We asked FedEx to review the case, then turned our attention to the collection agency, Synter Resource Group of Charleston, S.C.

Because sheesh, \$1,415.31 in “fees” — more than twice the alleged debt — sounded really wrong when considering protections under state and federal debt collection laws.

All the more strange were two conversations Santora said he had with Synter customer service representatives.

“They said no, it’s only \$600 (owed),” he said of the conversations. “Maybe they do that to scare you,” he said of the added fees.

Synter Resource Group didn’t provide any clarity. It said it could not discuss someone else’s account when Bamboozled inquired, but it asked us to have the folks from the church call.



But we didn't want them to end up with any old customer service rep.

So we asked for John Church — really, that's his last name — to make himself available. He's the company's co-founder, and he happens to be the person who responds to Better Business Bureau (BBB) complaints.

Synter has an A+ rating with BBB even though it's received 40 complaints in the last three years. As we've noted before, if a company is good at responding to BBB complaints — whether in the customer's favor or not — it can get a high grade.

Santora said he called Church — the man, not the entity — and he didn't get a call back.

But importantly, he got a call from FedEx. “She said everything was resolved,” he said he was told. “Don't respond to anything (from the collection agency).”

We asked FedEx what happened.

“We're committed to providing excellent service and support to all our customers,” spokeswoman Heather Wilson said. “We've worked directly with the customer to resolve the matter.”

The company declined to answer questions about how the whole thing went down.

“I think some businesses think that churches and houses of worship have deep pockets,” Santora said. “I feel obligated to watch every penny for the people who share their resources with us and expect good stewardship.”

At least now the church will have some extra dollars on hand when it celebrates its 175th anniversary next year.

*Karin Price Mueller, NJ Advance Media,  
[KPriceMueller@NJAdvanceMedia.com](mailto:KPriceMueller@NJAdvanceMedia.com)*