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Ex-CFO in Philadelphia archdiocese gets two to seven years for stealing $900,000

Matthew Gambino Catholic News Service | Aug. 27, 2012

PHILADELPHIA -- The former chief financial officer of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia will spend the next two to seven years in state prison for embezzling more than $900,000 from the church over seven years.

Common Pleas Court Judge Ellen Ceisler sentenced Anita Guzzardi, 44, to prison at a hearing Aug. 24 in Philadelphia on her third-degree felony conviction of theft by deception. Guzzardi will also serve seven years' probation on two other convictions, forgery and unlawful use of a computer. She had pleaded guilty to the three charges July 29.

Guzzardi sat downcast in a black business suit as Assistant District Attorney Lisa Caulfield described what she called the "lavish lifestyle" Guzzardi fueled through funds she embezzled in her work as a trusted senior financial officer of the archdiocese.

Beginning in late 2004, Caulfield said, Guzzardi began to write archdiocesan checks to cover her expenses on her American Express credit card. The deception grew to a second Amex card and a Chase card, expenses for which she covered by cutting more than 300 checks over time totaling $906,000.

Those expenses included frequent business trips in which she included family and friends, plus vacations to Hawaii, Las Vegas, the Bahamas and other locales, together with shopping sprees for clothes, gifts and flowers for herself, family and friends.

After her promotion from archdiocesan controller to CFO in 2011, Guzzardi was fired by the archdiocese as a result of a joint probe by American Express, the Philadelphia district attorney and archdiocesan investigators.

Caulfield rejected the contention of defense lawyer Louis R. Busica that Guzzardi's diagnosed gambling addiction -- she frequently racked up bills from casinos in Atlantic City, N.J. -- somehow clouded her judgment and was to blame for the embezzlement, or because of financial need.

Caulfield pointed out that Guzzardi earned a six-figure salary as archdiocesan controller and later CFO, and with her husband's income, the couple, who have no children, were well off.

"It wasn't impulse, it wasn't because she needed the money," Caulfield said. "She thought about it, disguised it, changed the amounts and dates of checks" to conceal her actions. "She knew what she was doing. It was not a reckless impulse. When you steal money and don't need it, that's plain greed."

Busica argued that his client's gambling addiction, depression and features of compulsive gambling and shopping in her childhood should mitigate a stiff sentence for the crime to which she pleaded guilty June 29.

He also argued that the 2005 Philadelphia grand jury report on sexual misconduct of priests toward minors, and the archdiocesan responses to the scandal, exacerbated Guzzardi's gambling addiction as she coped with the

revelations.

Ceisler sided with Caulfield's argument that Guzzardi's embezzlement had begun before the October 2005 report was issued. The thefts peaked from 2007 to 2009, especially on items such as outfitting a new home in upscale Haddon Heights, N.J., and travel, shopping and meal expenses.

Even after a second grand jury in early 2011, Guzzardi used her ability to write checks to make extra payments on her home mortgage principal, right up to her dismissal in July of that year.

In her closing statement, Guzzardi apologized through tears and a choking voice to some 20 family members and friends in the courtroom, to the Philadelphia Archdiocese and to her husband, "for putting you through this torment and grief."

"If it takes the rest of my life, I will try to make up for all the betrayal and lies I have caused so many people," she said. "I have a remorseful heart."

In a statement, the archdiocese said insurance will cover losses from the theft, but emphasized the breaking of the trust Guzzardi had earned during her tenure from "legitimate service to pastors, administrators and parishes."

"While the damage was contained, the fact that Mrs. Guzzardi hurt the very people she spent her life serving is deeply troubling," the statement said. "This is a difficult day for the many friends and co-workers who feel betrayed and confused by her actions. We trust the court to determine an appropriate sentence, balancing her genuine service against a serious crime that impacted so many people."

Guzzardi has paid back $260,000 to the archdiocese since her arrest. Her lawyer argued that she should be allowed to avoid jail time and to continue working to pay back the remaining $646,000.

Ceisler did not agree, saying house arrest and probation alone would be "a slap on the wrist," and not serve as a public deterrent. She also refused to set a later date for Guzzardi to report for prison.

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