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Woman charged with embezzling \$1 million from NY archdiocese

by David Gibson by Religion News Service

NEW YORK -- A 67-year-old woman with a criminal record for theft has been charged with siphoning \$1 million in donations while working in a finance office of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, church officials announced Monday.

The archdiocese said it did not conduct a criminal background check when the employee, Anita Collins, was hired in 2003. Collins' complex scheme drained money from an education fund at the same time the church was closing Catholic schools.

Church and law enforcement officials said over seven years, Collins sent fake invoices to the archdiocese, then issued about 450 checks to accounts she controlled, all in amounts just under the \$2,500 threshold that would have required a supervisor's approval.

Most of the money was apparently siphoned from the accounts payable system in the archdiocesan Department of Education Finance Office, according to a statement from archdiocesan spokesman Joseph Zwilling.

In a 2010 article in the archdiocese newspaper *Catholic New York*, Collins was lauded for volunteering at St. Patrick's Cathedral when Archbishop Timothy Dolan presided over a Mass welcoming 600 people to Catholicism.

Collins was described as an "unassuming" person; in a 2010 article in the archdiocesan newspaper, she said, "My faith has always been a steadfast part of my life."

Most of the money Collins allegedly embezzled was spent on mortgage payments and on "a lifestyle that

was not extravagant but was far beyond her lawful means," Adam Kaufmann, the chief of investigations for the Manhattan District Attorney, told *The New York Times*.

Outside auditors implementing enhanced financial safeguards in late 2011 initially found \$350,000 in missing funds, Zwilling said. After law enforcement officials were called in, the full extent of the theft was uncovered. Collins was confronted with the evidence and was fired Dec. 6, 2011.

"Sadly, there will always be individuals who seek to exploit and circumvent whatever system is established, but we will remain vigilant in our oversight," Zwilling said.

There has been a rash of large-scale embezzlement cases in the Catholic church in recent years, ranging from lay people embezzling from dioceses to pastors pilfering from their parishes. Many of these cases occurred despite warnings to church officials in the wake of the clergy sexual abuse scandals that they needed to tighten financial oversight as well.

Collins had previously pleaded guilty to criminal charges in fraud schemes at other New York employers in 1986 and 1999. The archdiocese says it now conducts criminal background checks on all employees and is reviewing its financial oversight policies.

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