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Embezzlement, a suicide and St. John's University

by Tom Gallagher

NCR Today

Embezzlement by people working in Catholic-sponsored enterprises continues to be a hot topic in the news these days. In Buffalo, N.Y., a nun is accused of stealing more than \$125,000. In Bonneauville, Pa., a parish priest is accused of stealing more than \$350,000. In Fort Kent, Maine, a priest suspected of embezzling parish funds will not face a prosecution by the state's attorney.

But the most sordid case of embezzlement is without question the case of Cecilia Chang, a 30-year employee and dean at the Vincentian-run St. John's University in Queens, N.Y.

Chang, 59, was facing two 205-count indictments and was in the middle of one trial in Brooklyn federal court for accusations of stealing more than \$1 million from the university.

One report noted that "there was virtually no oversight of her activities by former school President the Rev. Joseph Cahill, who is dead, or current President Donald Harrington."

A Vincentian priest, Harrington regularly accepted luxurious travel arrangements made by Chang and lavish, personal gifts from her.

The *New York Post* has this to say about the extraordinary gift-giving by Chang: "Chang had lavished gifts on many officials, later submitting phony invoices for reimbursement, according to testimony. The biggest beneficiary was the university's president, the Rev. Donald Harrington, who later testified against her. She provided him more than 40 custom-made suits from Hong Kong, along with pricey Patek Philippe watches and lavish stays at The Four Seasons hotel in Hawaii, according to testimony."

On the witness stand, however, Harrington amazingly remembered things differently: He was "uncomfortable" and didn't remember important facts from days gone by. Funny how that works -- and

convenient, too.

Incredibly, and against her lawyers' counsel, Chang took the witness stand in her own defense.

"Chang essentially conceded to jurors that she'd lied on tax returns and to the FBI about some \$1 million she was accused of embezzling from the Queens Catholic university -- and her sometimes loud, defensive testimony was repeatedly interrupted by the judge's admonitions, courtroom laughter and her own contentious shouts of 'No!' " reports the *New York Post*.

A day later, the trial came to an abrupt end: Chang committed suicide.

"Her suicide scuttled the trial and shocked its participants. 'A Shakespearean tragedy,' Brooklyn federal Judge Sterling Johnson called it, musing aloud that Chang testified 'to get it off her chest.' "

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Now what to do about Harrington?

Harrington has been president of St. John's University for more than 20 years. No doubt he did plenty of good things for the university during that time. Nonetheless, the depth and scope of the Chang-Harrington affair, in which Harrington played a major role, both in his apparent lack of oversight and his willingness to accept personal gifts worth tens of thousands of dollars from Chang, leads one to conclude that Harrington has lost his way as a leader and as a Vincentian priest.

It's worth recalling that St. Vincent de Paul created four "weapons," or vows, for his priests, namely poverty, chastity, obedience and stability.

"Vincent hoped that, through pronouncing such vows, his missionaries would renew and deepen the gift of themselves to God for the service of the poor and that later, in time of trial, they would be strengthened by recalling that they had committed themselves for life to this service," according to "The way of Vincent de Paul: four Vincentian vows" by Robert Maloney.

It's time for Harrington to step down immediately, either through a retirement or resignation. The university's Board of Trustees and board of governors need to step in, do their jobs and execute a change of leadership of the university.

It's a no-brainer.

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