

Louisa, Virginia priest case may have longer trail

By BILL FREEHLING, The Free Lance – Star (VA), January 17, 2007

Investigators looking into a Louisa County, Virginia, priest accused of embezzling money from two rural churches believe the scheme goes back longer than the six years written on the indictment.

Rodney Lee Rodis, 50, was indicted on one count of felony embezzlement Jan. 8 by a Louisa Circuit Court grand jury. Rodis had been pastor at St. Jude Catholic Church in Mineral and Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Buckner between 1993 and May 2006.

The indictment accuses him of stealing from the two rural churches between September 2001 and October 2006. But state police Sgt. Kevin Barrick said investigators are “sure” that the thefts had been going on for longer.

Barrick said federal law allows banks to destroy records after six years.

Therefore, detectives have been able to search Rodis’ bank records only back to 2001. Investigators have been asking parishioners to contact them if they made donations to the two churches before 2001, Barrick said. They’ve been getting a steady stream of responses.

It’s unclear the exact amount that Rodis is accused of stealing. Virginia’s threshold for felony embezzlement is \$200, so Rodis is formally charged of stealing only that amount.

William Etherington, an attorney for the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, has estimated that Rodis stole \$600,000.

Barrick said he expects that the total surpasses that estimate, and that he “wouldn’t be surprised” if it’s more than \$1 million. He said the total is “climbing every day” as more parishioners contact investigators.

Rodis is currently free on a \$10,000 bond. His arraignment is scheduled for tomorrow morning in Louisa Circuit Court. A trial date could be set at that time.

Rodis was arrested Jan. 9 at his home at 5904 Watson Lane in Spotsylvania County. Joyce F. Sillador purchased the house in June 1994 for \$114,929, according to the deed of trust filed in Spotsylvania Circuit Court.

Online public records show Rodis lived at the home as far back as July 1994 with the 44-year-old Sillador, who sometimes used Rodis’ last name. Neighbors said three girls estimated to range in age from elementary-school age to college age also lived there.

Etherington said it’s his understanding that Rodis was not married, although neighbors assumed that they were. It’s unclear if the girls are his daughters. As a Catholic priest, Rodis was not allowed to marry. The Catholic diocese was unaware of Rodis’ living arrangements prior to the indictment.

Rodney Rodis’ name starts appearing on Spotsylvania court records regarding the Watson Lane house as far back as November 2001. A form dated May 26, 2006, showed that Rodis and Sillador paid off the last \$76,000 owed on the house and were released from the mortgage.

Detectives who searched the Watson Lane home in December found a “Lucky Money” receipt dated May 24, 2006. Lucky Money is a service that allows people to wire money between the U.S. and Philippines, according to Luckymoney.com.

Rodis, a native and citizen of the Philippines, retired from the two Louisa churches around the same time that the mortgage was paid off and the receipt from Lucky Money was formulated.

Neighbors said Rodis had traveled to the Philippines at times. Etherington said he was here on a religious worker's visa that expired in 2015. It's possible that Rodis could be deported if convicted on a felony charge. He had to surrender his passport as part of the conditions of bond.

One neighbor said that Rodis planned to return to the Philippines when Sillador retired in a few years. There, he wanted to build a big house, run for mayor and, eventually, for president.

Neighbors said they didn't know he was a priest. Some said they believed he was in the "import-export business," which Seinfeld fans will recognize as one of the many made-up occupations of George Costanza. Neighbors said they were somewhat in the dark about Rodis' household.

Detectives who searched the home Dec. 11 seized a Dell laptop, receipts containing contribution records, the St. Jude directory and donation list, information about accounts through Raymond James and Virginia Heartland Bank, and statements and checks from First Union Bank between June 1996 and July 2003.

The investigation began in November after a parishioner who had donated \$1,000 asked for a receipt for tax reasons. There was no record of the donation. Rodis is primarily suspected of embezzling funds from checks that were made out to the churches. Etherington said cash collections rose during the time Rodis is accused of embezzling funds.

Etherington said that Immaculate Conception has 114 families, and St. Jude has 276. He said there are also many people who spend summers on Lake Anna and attend the rural churches.

Rodis' faculties have already been suspended by the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, meaning he can't present himself publicly as a priest but can attend Mass. The diocese has not said whether it will attempt to have Rodis defrocked through the Vatican.

Rodis was ordained a priest of the Order of St. Camillus in 1986, according to The Catholic Virginia. He served in churches in Virginia Beach and Newport News before joining the Richmond diocese in 1991. The sacraments he performed remain valid, church officials say.

Etherington said the Richmond diocese hopes restitution will be part of a possible sentence. He said there could be a civil suit against Rodis, at which the diocese would seek to seize any assets obtained illegally.