

4-Year Prison Term for Priest Accused of Stealing From Parish

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

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A pillar of the Roman Catholic church in New York suffered an extraordinary fall today as a judge sentenced him to four years in prison for stealing tens of thousands of dollars from his parish on the affluent Upper East Side.

The priest, Monsignor John G. Woolsey, 69, was accused of stealing more than \$800,000 from his former church, St. John the Martyr, and using it to finance a life style more in keeping with that of a corporate chief executive, including golf outings, the purchase of expensive watches and cosmetic dental work.

The judge, wearing a tie and shirtsleeves, stood up and leaned over his bench in a gesture of intimacy as he looked the priest in the eye and told him that he had considered giving him no jail time, as the defense lawyer had asked.

“But I’ll tell you right now I’m not going to do that,” the judge, State Supreme Court Justice Bruce Allen, continued.

“And you should know that across the street in criminal court, people who steal cans of tuna fish wind up going to jail for 30 days or 50 days,” Justice Allen said.

But Justice Allen said he had been touched by the more than 140 “letters from the heart,” delivered to him from Monsignor Woolsey’s friends, fellow priests and parishioners, and in light of those, was cutting a year off the promised sentence of no more than five years, and sentencing the priest to 1 to 4 years in prison and \$50,000 in restitution, in addition to \$200,000 that the monsignor already paid.

As he heard the sentence, Monsignor Woolsey seemed so stunned that he was not able to stand up for a few minutes. His lawyer, Nicholas DeFeis, leaned over him and hugged him. Then Monsignor Woolsey rose unsteadily to his feet and was placed in handcuffs by court officers. He recovered his composure enough to turn and offer a shaky, professional smile, of the kind a priest or psychiatrist might hone during many years of counseling, to about 20 supporters in the court pews, some of whom had tears streaming down their cheeks.

The prosecutor, Matthew Amatruda, said Monsignor Woolsey had abused the trust of parishioners by telling them he was spending their donations on repairs to the church and good works, when he was actually spending the money on his own lavish life style. The investigation began in 2003 when the family of an elderly parishioner, Rose Cale, accused him of inducing her to give him \$490,000 in cash and stocks. She died in 2003 at the age of 88.

Monsignor Woolsey said his parishioners had wanted him to be able to use some of their money for himself.

Cardinal Edward Egan, the archbishop of New York was among those who submitted letters to the court on the monsignor’s behalf. But the cardinal’s letter was drafted in very measured terms. “Certainly, the crimes to which Monsignor Woolsey has pled guilty are of the utmost seriousness, and they must be dealt with appropriately by the court,” the cardinal wrote, in a letter dated Sept. 19. “It is always a matter of particular concern to a bishop when one of his priests stands accused of any crime, including that of enriching himself at the expense of a parish to which he has been assigned and to which he has been appointed to be a faithful steward.”

The cardinal said he was writing not to “address the underlying crimes,” but to provide an account of Monsignor Woolsey’s good works up until that time.

Before being sentenced, Monsignor Woolsey apologized, saying, “God willing I could turn back the clock, which I can’t do.”

He spent more time, however, talking about how it had felt to be at the center of a public scandal than expressing remorse. “I have felt the sting of comments when I was down,” he said. As a result, he said, he would be “more conscious of someone who is down.” He compared himself to Moses, invoking what he said was a scriptural story in which Moses is tired of standing and praying, and two of his followers “come along and hold each arm.”

He was grateful, he said, to his supporters for sticking with him.

Monsignor Woolsey avoided trial by pleading guilty in May to grand larceny. In that plea, he admitted only that he had stolen “more than \$50,000” from his parish, and said he had mental problems. His lawyer repeated today that Monsignor Woolsey’s thievery was “compulsive, repetitive and irrational.”

Exactly how much money Monsignor Woolsey took was debated by defense and prosecution lawyers for nearly an hour before the sentencing today. The amount could be important, lawyers said, in determining how much time he spends in jail before being released. He is eligible for work release immediately, his lawyer said, and for probation after a year.

Monsignor Woolsey was ordained in 1965, after completing St. Joseph Seminary in Yonkers, and assigned to St. Margaret of Antioch Parish in Pearl River, N.Y. He was admired for his inspirational homilies, and his sermons were often standing room only, his lawyer said. He was a teacher at Cardinal Hayes High School in the Bronx in the late 1960’s, and in 1977 was appointed assistant director of the Office of Christian and Family Development for the archdiocese, preparing couples for marriage.