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In this Aug. 10, 2017 file photo, Jerome Dimitriou, executive director of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, describes the construction progress at the St. Nicholas National Shrine, right, in New York. Dimitriou was arrested Monday, Nov. 25, 2019, on charges of embezzling nearly half a million dollars from the organization. (AP/Mark Lennihan, File)

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The former head administrator of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America was arrested Monday on charges he embezzled over half a million dollars from the organization even as the church ran out of money trying to build a shrine to replace a church crushed in the Sept. 11 attacks.

Jerry Dimitriou, 55, of Greenlawn, New York, was freed on \$150,000 bail after he was charged with two counts of wire fraud, accused of pocketing hundreds of thousands of dollars illegally while serving as the administrator from 2000 until late 2017.

Dimitriou oversaw construction of a new church and Sept. 11 shrine at the World Trade Center until the project ran out of money in 2017.

The St. Nicholas National Shrine, designed by renowned architect Santiago Calatrava and estimated to cost \$50 million, was supposed to replace a tiny church that was crushed by the trade center's south tower.

A criminal complaint in Manhattan federal court said Dimitriou knew that the archdiocese, which oversaw 540 parishes and about 1.5 million Greek Orthodox faithful across the U.S., was facing financial difficulties as he took money he was not authorized to receive.

It said he directed subordinates to give him extra salary payouts totaling over \$488,000 over one five-year stretch.

They said he raked in tens of thousands of dollars more by charging hundreds of unauthorized personal expenses to the organization's credit card, including gym membership fees and online music. According to the complaint, Dimitriou charged \$61,000 to the credit card for his family's airline travel.

At an initial appearance before Magistrate Judge Robert Lehrburger, a prosecutor argued unsuccessfully for Dimitriou to be subjected to minimally restrictive electronic monitoring while he awaits trial.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael Neff said the amount of money the government alleges Dimitriou embezzled from the church was expected to rise, "perhaps significantly," as the investigation proceeds.

He also said the 3½ years in prison federal sentencing guidelines would recommend if Dimitriou eventually pleaded guilty would only rise as the amount of money alleged to have been stolen grows.

Neff said Dimitriou had considerable assets and the means to flee, if he chose to do so.

There was solid documentation for the fraud, he said, because Dimitriou left behind a paper trail that includes financial and corporate records along with emails confirming illegal expenditures.

It was, the prosecutor said, "a straightforward scam and a highly profitable one."

Nathaniel Marmur, Dimitriou's lawyer, said his client worked at the church for 30 years until 2017.

Dimitriou, who now works as a consultant, looks forward to fighting the charges, he said.

"Jerry has dedicated his entire life to the church, and we look forward to all the facts coming to light," Marmur said.

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