News



A sign displays the tribunal court location, as people walk along a corridor at Milan Court of Justice, Italy, April 26, 2024. A Sister of Charity in northern Italy was placed under house arrest after a nearly four-month investigation by prosecutors revealed she allegedly used her prison ministry to connect local mafia bosses with inmates. (OSV News/Reuters/Claudia Greco)

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A Sister of Charity in northern Italy was placed under house arrest after a nearly four-month investigation by prosecutors revealed she allegedly used her prison ministry to connect local mafia bosses with inmates.

According to the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera, Sr. Anna Donelli was among 25 individuals arrested Dec. 5 in a major sting operation in the Northern Italian city of Brescia targeting a mob family with ties to the 'ndragheta organized crime syndicate, one of the world's most powerful, extensive and wealthy drug-trafficking groups based in Calabria.

Among the charges included in the case's arrest warrants were robbery, extortion, usury, false invoices, arms and drug trafficking, as well as vote-buying. Police also seized 1.8 million euros ($1.9 million) and conducted searches in several major Italian cities, including Reggio Calabria, Milan, Como, Verona and Treviso.

Donelli denied the allegations against her in a statement to Corriere della Sera through her lawyer, Roberto Ranieli.

Calling the accusations "shameful," the Italian nun said she always "sought to foster positive human relationships."

"I trust the investigators will want to hear what I have to say soon," she said.

"Anyone who knows her well cannot believe she intentionally committed the crimes she's accused of," Ranieli said. "As her lawyer, I will carefully study the case files, but at first glance, I see no direct or concrete evidence — just rumors that could lead to misinterpretations."

Several other people, including prominent politicians were arrested.

"This investigation confirms the entrenchment of criminal organizations that have established branches even in this region," said Francesco Prete, Brescia's chief

prosecutor, according to ANSA Italian news agency. "We are talking about individuals linked to the 'ndrangheta, who have exploited the criminal reputation of their organization of origin while adapting to the northern territory, where they engage in fiscal matters."

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Prosecutors said Donelli allegedly provided the mafia clan, led by Stefano Tripodi and his son, Francesco, with "spiritual assistance in prisons to convey messages between members of the criminal organization and those detained in prison."

"She somehow made herself available to the clan to relay information from prison to the Tripodi group," said lead prosecutor Teodoro Catananti.

Among the pieces of evidence gathered against Donelli, who often visited prisoners in Brescia and Milan, was a wiretapped conversation in which Tripodi made references to a "nun" who had made "a pact" with him.

"She is one of us," Tripodi said, according to excerpts of the wiretap published by ANSA news agency.

The arrest warrant for the nun, signed by a judge, stated that Donelli allegedly received and transmitted messages from a criminal organization, Corriere della Sera reported.

Prosecutors said communications between Donelli and Tripodi's criminal organization were also intercepted. The nun was instructed by the group to introduce herself to a member of another criminal association at Brescia's Canton Mombello prison as "a friend of Stefano."

On other occasions, she was introduced by Tripodi and his son as "the nun who works in the prison" and saying that "if you need something inside, she's one of ours."

The judge who signed the arrest warrant said Donelli's role as a messenger was "an undeniably significant and efficient contribution" that strengthened the Tripodi clan, including receiving messages from inmates that were used "to better plan criminal strategies in response to investigative activities" by law enforcement.

Several unnamed former inmates and volunteers at the San Vittore prison where she visited came to the nun's defense.

"If they arrest her, they should arrest all of us. She may have been blunt, but she helped so many people," the volunteer told Corriere della Sera.

A former inmate told the newspaper the nun had "told us about her unhappy adolescence and losing her twin sister in an accident. That's why she emphasized maintaining relationships with our families."

"If we needed to get a message to our families, like asking them to call or send cigarettes, she would help," another inmate said.

Donelli is expected to appear in Brescia before a judge for questioning Dec. 13, her lawyer said.