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O.C. Religious Leader, Two Others Guilty of Health Code Charges

Members of Piecemakers could face fines and as much as a year in jail. An appeal is planned.

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By KELLY-ANNE SUAREZ Times Staff Writer

After deliberating just 45 minutes, an Orange County jury convicted religious leader Marie Kolasinski, 85, and two of her Piecemaker associates Tuesday on seven counts of interfering with county health inspectors and operating a restaurant without a permit.

The trio, members of a Costa Mesa-based sect of 26 people who live communally, face fines and a maximum sentence of one year in jail. Sentencing is set for Jan. 12.

The trial is the group's latest entanglement with government agencies and the law.

In 2002, after brushing off two county code inspectors as "rapists," "Martian reptiles" and "Gestapo whores" in a newspaper ad, the group settled a libel lawsuit for \$20,000.

In 1997, it fought a misdemeanor charge of failing to acquire a permit after it had staged a musical in the store's parking lot.

And in 1995, the FBI investigated the commune after members sent a letter to county officials that was sprinkled with salty language and included a reference to the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building. Agents concluded that the group did not represent a serious threat.

Kolasinski, a slight woman with white hair and a wry sense of humor, frequently sprinkles her language with profanity, saying those are the only words her foes seem to understand.

During the second and final day of this week's trial, an emotional Kolasinski came to the brink of tears as she described being roughly arrested.

She went on to explain why her faith called for her to answer only to God's authority and not to county health agents who wanted to inspect the Piecemakers' crafts store and restaurant on Adams Avenue.

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Judge Kelly W. MacEachern scolded the religious leader when she ventured away from the lawyers' questioning.

"This is not a soapbox," MacEachern said. "This is not a TV show, are we clear on that? The attorneys will ask you questions, and you will answer those questions."

When Deputy Dist. Atty. Scott Steiner asked Kolasinski if she had delayed or interfered with the health inspectors, she said, "definitely," adding, "It's our duty to break the laws that bind us."

During closing arguments, Steiner reminded jurors that their role was to assess the facts through "the strainer of logic" when determining whether a law had been broken.