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Vatican officials say 'corruption' charges by envoy to U.S. are 'unfounded'

Francis X. Rocca Catholic News Service | Feb. 6, 2012

VATICAN CITY -- In an unusually public rebuke of a high-ranking colleague, Vatican officials dismissed as baseless the accusations of "corruption and abuse of power" made in letters by an archbishop who is now apostolic nuncio to the United States.

In a statement released by the Vatican Feb. 4, Cardinal-designate Giuseppe Bertello and Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo, the current and immediate past presidents of the Governorate of Vatican City State, described as a "cause of great sadness" the recent "unlawful publication" by Italian journalists of two letters addressed to Pope Benedict XVI and Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state.

The letters, written by Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano when he was the governorate's secretary general, or second-highest official, contained assertions based on "erroneous evaluations" or "fears unsupported by proof," the statement said.

Archbishop Vigano's letter to the pope, dated March 27, 2011, lamented "so many situations of corruption and abuse of power long rooted in the various departments" of the governorate, and warned that the archbishop's departure from his position there "would provoke profound confusion and dejection" among all those supporting his efforts at reform.

Pope Benedict named the archbishop as nuncio to the United States in October 2011.

The governorate manages the 108 acres of Vatican City State, including the Vatican Gardens and Museums.

During Archbishop Vigano's stint at the governorate, a budget deficit of nearly $9.8 million in 2009 turned into a surplus of $28 million in 2010.

According to the Feb. 4 Vatican statement, which was also signed by the current secretary general and a former vice secretary general of the governorate, the improved finances during the period in question were "due principally to two factors": the management of the governorate's financial investments by a different Vatican office, and, "in even greater measure, to the excellent results of the Vatican Museums."

Archbishop Vigano's letter to Cardinal Bertone, dated May 8, 2011, complained of the cardinal's plans to remove the archbishop from his post, and accused the cardinal of breaking a promise to let the archbishop succeed the then-president of the governorate, Cardinal Lajolo, upon the latter's retirement.

In the letter, the archbishop blamed Cardinal Bertone's change of mind on the effects of "strategies put into action in order to destroy me in the eyes of Your Eminence," including the planting of libelous stories in the Italian press by several of Archbishop Vigano's enemies among fellow Vatican officials.

The archbishop singled out one such official -- Msgr. Paolo Nicolini, managing director of the Vatican

Museums -- for especially severe and colorful criticism, including charges of mismanagement.

The Feb. 4 statement did not acknowledge several other recently published letters apparently written by Archbishop Vigano; but it seemed to contest certain charges made in one of those letters, dated April 4, 2011, and addressed to Pope Benedict.

That letter alleged "corruption" in the granting of contracts to outside vendors: "Jobs were always given to the same companies ... at a cost that was double that of similar work carried out outside the Vatican."

The letter claimed that the archbishop had been able in one year to cut the cost of the Christmas Nativity scene in St. Peter's Square by 250,000 euro ($330,000).

The same letter criticized the "inexperience" of investment advisers whose recommendations purportedly led the Vatican to lose 2.5 million euro ($3.3 million) in a single transaction.

By contrast, the Feb. 4 Vatican statement emphasized the regularity of the governorate's procedure for assigning major contracts, with oversight provided by a special committee appointed by the president.

The statement also expressed "full faith" in the "illustrious members" of the governorate's financial and management committee, its departments heads and other officials, in spite of "suspicions and accusations" which have been "revealed -- upon careful examination -- as unfounded."

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