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Leaked letters reveal ViganÚ's complaints of corruption

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 13, 2012

Archbishop Carlo Maria ViganÚ attends the opening Mass of the National Prayer Vigil for Life at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington Jan. 22. (CNS/Nancy Phelan Wiechec)

ROME -- Both in Washington and in Rome, leaking supposedly confidential material is high art. Conventional wisdom in both places, therefore, holds that you should never write anything down you?d be uncomfortable seeing in the newspapers.

As a veteran Roman now living in Washington, Italian Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò has fresh occasion these days to take that wisdom to heart.

Named last October as Pope Benedict XVI?s new nuncio, or ambassador, to the United States, Viganò found himself in the eye of a media storm in late January, triggered in Italy by leaks of confidential letters he wrote to the pope complaining of alleged financial cronyism and corruption in the Vatican.

As the Vatican?s former point man for financial reform, Viganò reportedly warned Benedict that his exit from that position, either to Washington or anyplace else, would send exactly the wrong signal.

Despite Viganò?s best efforts, he was removed in October 2011 and sent to Washington -- though many observers believe that decision was less a verdict on his financial house-cleaning, than a face-saving solution to his rocky relationships with other Vatican personnel.

Revealed by an Italian TV program called ?The Untouchables,? Viganò wrote the letters in early 2011. In one, Viganò reportedly told the pope that his removal would ?provoke confusion among all those who?ve believed that it?s possible to clean up so many situations of corruption and dishonesty.?

In another, addressed to Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican?s secretary of state, Viganò said that the management of Vatican investments had been entrusted to a group of Italian bankers ?who look after their interests more than ours.? He complained that contracts are ?always given to the same companies at costs at least double compared to those charged outside the Vatican,? on the basis of personal connections and patronage ties.

Viganò also described a campaign of defamation against him inside the Vatican, openly naming names as the alleged ringleaders. They include an Italian monsignor who works at the Vatican museums, and a well-known Italian layman who?s held senior positions both in the Vatican and at the Italian public broadcaster RAI, and who is viewed as especially close to Bertone.

Viganò accused both figures of various forms of misconduct, and accused both of being the source of ?calumnious judgments, evil insinuations [and] lies? circulating within the Vatican, intended to discredit him with Bertone.

Although a Vatican spokesperson complained of sensationalist media coverage, he also effectively confirmed the letters? authenticity, expressing ?sadness over the publication of reserved documents.?

In the wake of the disclosed letters, a Vatican official insisted in a Jan. 31 statement that Viganò continues to enjoy the pope?s ?unquestionable esteem and trust.?

The statement also asserted that Benedict and his aides are committed to ?ever greater transparency and trustworthiness, and to attentive control of economic activity.? It cited the fact that the same day the Viganò story broke, the Vatican announced it had ratified three U.N. conventions intended to curb illegal currency flows and transactions.

The story took another turn with a Feb. 4 statement from the top brass at the government of the city-state. It was cosigned by Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo, the former president of the city-state (and thus Viganò?s former boss), and the current top man, Cardinal-designate Giuseppe Bertello, along with two other officials.

The statement says that Viganò?s letters create the impression that the government of the city-state is ?an untrustworthy entity in the grip of obscure forces.? In fact, it says, Viganò?s charges ?are the fruit of an erroneous evaluation, or based on fears not supported by evidence ... indeed, openly contradicted by the principal personalities invoked as witnesses.?

A policy of ?transparency and rigor,? the statement insists, continues with ?equal commitment? after Viganò?s departure.

The statement further says that in 2010, the government of the city-state had a surplus of $28 million -- due, it says, to the performance of its investments and, even more, to a very good year for the Vatican museums.

While the Viganò story unfolded, the Vatican got some good news on an old financial scandal, and struggled to stay clear of another new one.

On Feb. 1, a federal judge in Mississippi dismissed the long-running *Dale* v. *Colagiovanni* lawsuit against the Vatican. Insurance commissioners of five states filed the suit in 2002, claiming the Vatican had been complicit in a scam, perpetrated by con artist Martin Frankel, that drained a series of insurance companies of more than $200 million.

The lawsuit was dismissed ?with prejudice,? meaning that it can?t be filed again.

Meanwhile, an Italian newspaper suggested on Jan. 31 that the Vatican might be involved in an Italian scandal, in which a financier bilked investors of some $300 million. Because one of those investors was a Dominican priest who serves as a postulator, meaning an official responsible for sainthood causes, the paper implied that he might have been acting on behalf of the Vatican.

A spokesperson, however, insisted that the priest is not a Vatican official and that the Vatican?s Congregation

for the Causes of Saints has ?absolutely nothing to do with the events spoken of in the article in question.?

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