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'VatiLeaks' trial of Vatican computer tech begins

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A Vatican computer technician charged with aiding and abetting the papal butler in stealing confidential documents went on trial amid legal arguments over the definition of the charge and questions about the "anonymous source" who reported him to officials.

As the trail began Nov. 5, the lawyer for Claudio Sciarpelletti, 48, argued Nov. 5 that his client and the papal butler, Paolo Gabriele, were acquaintances, not friends, and that Sciarpelletti had no motive to set aside "20 years of service to the Holy See" to help someone he wasn't particularly close to.

The court rejected the motion by Gianluca Benedetti, the defense attorney, to drop the charge against Sciarpelletti, who works in the Vatican Secretariat of State, but accepted his request for a copy of documents from the butler's trial. After asking Benedetti how much time he needed to read the documents, the court ruled the trial will continue Nov. 10.

Gabriele, who was sentenced to 18 months in jail for stealing and leaking confidential Vatican correspondence, including letters to and from the pope, was present in the courtroom along with others called as witnesses. They will be questioned Nov. 10.

Sciarpelletti was arrested May 25, two days after Gabriele; Vatican police searched Sciarpelletti's office after investigators were told that he and Gabriele had "continual contacts."

Benedetti told the court, "Everything began with an anonymous tip -- from someone in the Secretariat of State, I understand -- who spoke of frequent contacts between Paolo Gabriele and Claudio Sciarpelletti, and from there the idea of a friendship developed."

But, Benedetti said, the two were little more than acquaintances. And, he said, if the two were such good friends, the court should wonder why, over the course of six years, Gabriele refused to allow Sciarpelletti to replace his work computer even though it was "obsolete."

The court rejected Benedetti's request for "the acquisition of evidence relative to telephone traffic and electronic mail communications" between Sciarpelletti and Gabriele. The court said it would be difficult to ascertain precisely the men's relationship from phone records and emails.

The Vatican's indictment of Sciarpelletti said he had led police to their key piece of evidence against him: an envelope in his desk marked "Personal: P. Gabriele."

Indicting Sciarpelletti in August, the court said that, among other contents, the envelope contained a copy of a section of an Italian journalist's book, which was based on documents leaked by Gabriele. It also contained copies of email, but the court did not describe the email further.

According to the court documents, Sciarpelletti's descriptions of his relationship with Gabriele and of the origin and destination of the envelope changed several times over the course of the investigation.

"The contrasting version of facts furnished by the accused, Claudio Sciarpelletti, may have hindered the investigation," the indictment said, leading to the charge of "aiding and abetting," which is the closest crime the Vatican has to an accusation of being an accessory after the fact by obstructing justice.

At the opening of the trial, Benedetti asked the court how it could accuse Sciarpelletti of obstructing the investigation when the Vatican police had already confiscated from Gabriele's Vatican apartment 82 boxes of material, including about 1,000 pages of sensitive correspondence, much of which had been leaked to and published by an Italian journalist.

Benedetti said the differing version of facts initially given by Sciarpelletti was due to his client's "emotional confusion."

Sciarpelletti had spent one night in a Vatican jail cell and then was released on his own recognizance. If found guilty, he is not expected to be sentenced to jail time, although the charge could carry a penalty of up to one year in prison.

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