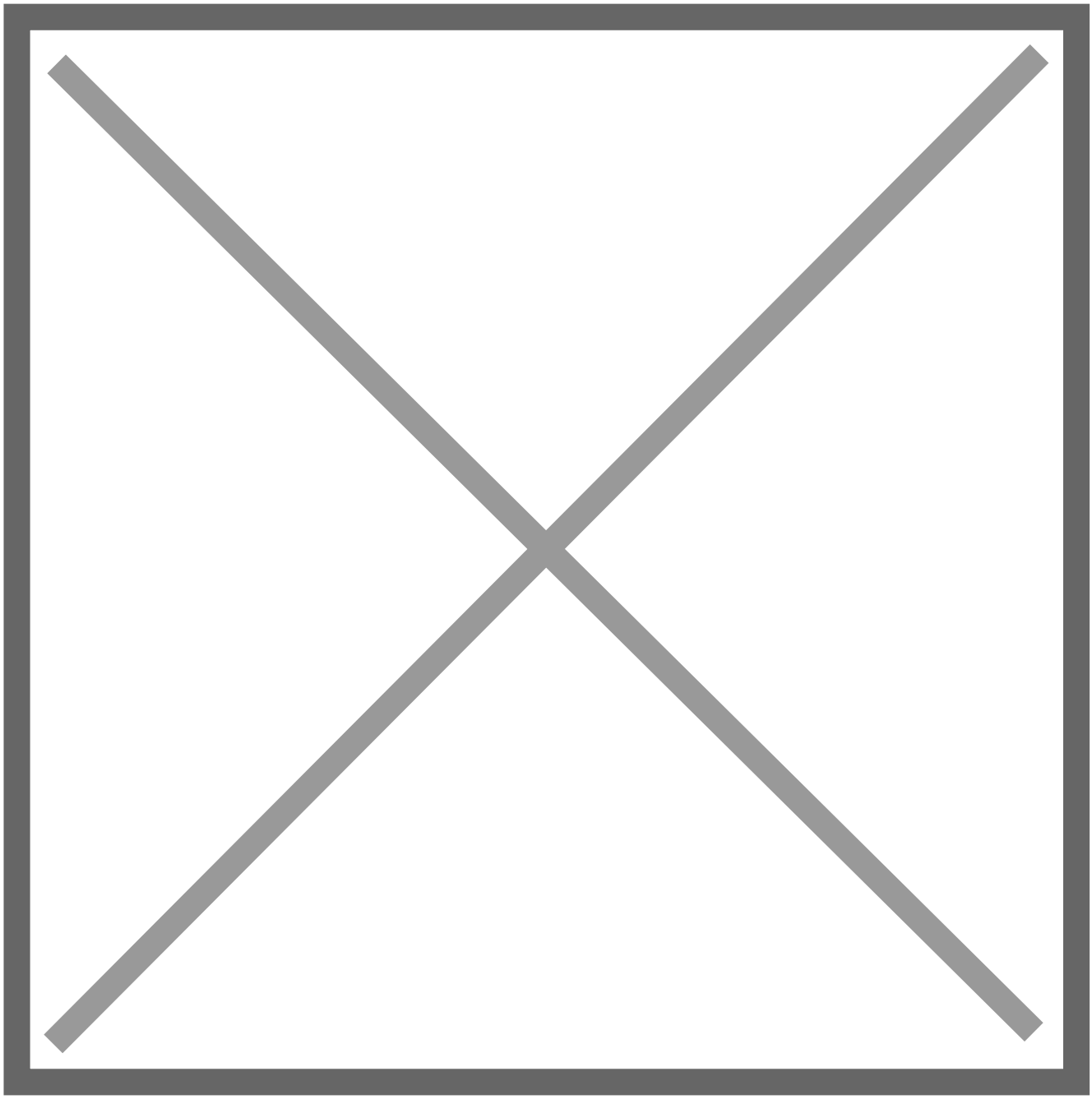
Vatican
News



Carmelo Barbagallo, president of the Vatican's Financial Information and Supervision Authority, gestures during a July 3, 2020, interview in Rome. In Australia, people inside and outside the church are calling on authorities to get to the bottom of mystery funds transferred from the Vatican to Australia. (CNS/Reuters/Remo Casilli)

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Sydney — January 6, 2021
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People inside and outside the church are calling on authorities to get to the bottom of mystery funds transferred from the Vatican to Australia.

As Australia's bishops are considering requesting information from the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre, a source close to the Vatican told The Catholic Weekly, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Sydney, that it was "completely implausible" that $2.3 billion Australian dollars (U.S. $1.8 billion) in Vatican funds transferred to Australia from Rome between 2014 and 2020 were legitimate.

In October 2020, the Holy See released a detailed 2019 financial statement. It closed the year with a budget deficit of 11 million euros (about U.S. $12.9 million at the Oct. 1 exchange rate). The statement showed it had 307 million euros in revenues, 318 million euros in expenditures and a total of 1.4 billion euros in net equity.

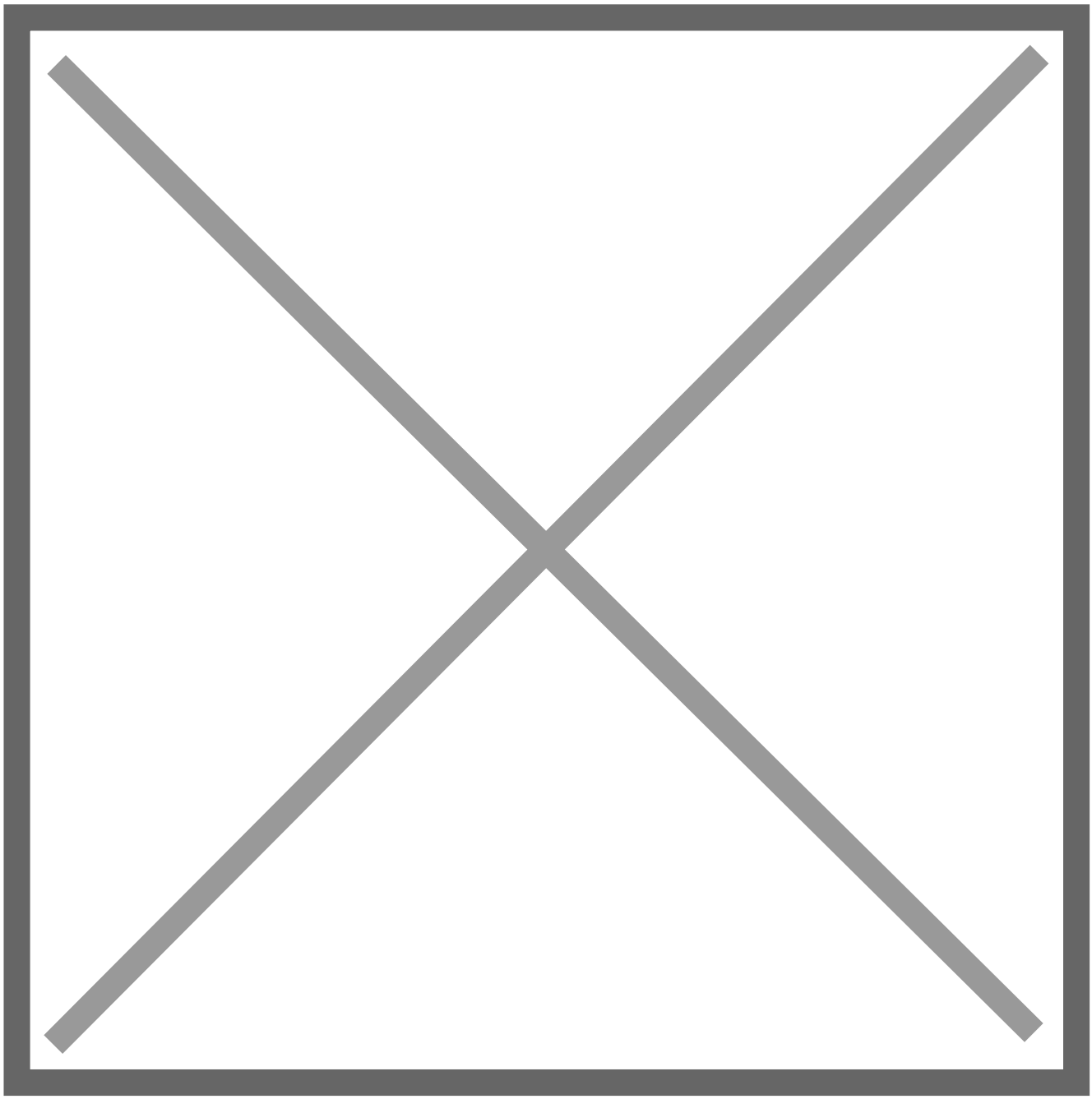
The source told The Catholic Weekly the Vatican did not have AU$2.3 billion to spend.

"This is completely inconsistent with the financial information the Vatican has published, while its improved financial policies signed by Pope Francis in 2014 require any investments to be completely disclosed," the source said. "Given the suspicious nature of these transfers, they certainly warrant further investigation."

The Vatican has said it does not know the origin or destination of the money, with a senior Vatican official telling media the Holy See would seek details from Australian authorities.

Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, president of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, told The Australian newspaper that the bishops may also ask the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre to reveal whether any of the funds sent from Vatican City in 47,000 separate transactions went to Catholic organizations in Australia.

He said the bishops did not know about the transfers until December, were "astonished" at their scale and will request an investigation from Pope Francis into how they occurred without the bishops' knowledge.



Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, president of the Australian bishops' conference, is pictured in an April 10, 2020, photo. In Australia, people inside and outside the church are calling on authorities to get to the bottom of mystery funds transferred from the Vatican to Australia. (CNS/AAP Image via Reuters/Dan Peled)

Since October, Australian Sen. Concetta Fierravanti-Wells has pursued an alleged transfer of AU$1.14 million from the Vatican to Australia at the time of the investigation into Australian Cardinal George Pell for historical sexual abuse

offenses, of which he was later cleared by a unanimous decision of the High Court.

Fierravanti-Wells, chair of the Australian government's Standing Committee for the Scrutiny of Delegated Legislation, sought information from the transaction reporters and analysis center, the Australian Federal Police, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade about the nature of the transfers and about local investigations and cooperation with the Vatican's own ongoing investigations into financial corruption and mismanagement.

The discovery of the mystery transfers, reported by the analysis center in December, raises even more questions.

"This is a complex web of issues involving actions both in Rome and in Australia," Fierravanti-Wells told The Catholic Weekly.

"There are many legitimate questions remaining unanswered, including from Vatican authorities, AFP, AUSTRAC and most especially, from Victorian police and judicial authorities. Transparency and accountability of these institutions to the Australian public require that the matters be pursued," she said.

A former Australian financial services director who has never worked for the Catholic Church told The Catholic Weekly that the large number of transfers seemed to be "designed to avoid reporting." Under federal law, banks and money transfer companies are required to report amounts transferred locally or from overseas over AU$10,000. One possible explanation that the funds may have been intended for investment purposes in this country was "highly unlikely, if not fanciful," the retired director said.

"A reputable international investor would not be investing a large sum of money in one regional market but would be looking to diversify across markets and regions," the retired director said.

"Such an investor would most certainly be looking to major global managers based outside Australia to achieve such diversification. ... Nor would such an investor be involved in such a high number of individual transactions of small amounts, as such investors make decisions to get into (and out of) markets as quickly as possible."

When releasing the Vatican's budget report last year, Jesuit Fr. Juan Antonio Guerrero Alves, head of the Secretariat for the Economy, spoke of Francis'

commitment to transparency and said that "it is possible that in some cases, the Holy See has been not just poorly advised, but also swindled."

He spoke in relation to the Vatican's current investigation into some of its investments, including a London luxury property deal.

"I believe that we are learning from past mistakes or imprudence," he said.

Australian Federal Police are investigating some of the transfers and have referred some information to the Victorian Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC).

In a December interview, Pell, whom Francis hired in 2014 to oversee and reform the Vatican's finances, described the Holy See as risking "slowly going broke."

Expressing support for his successor, Guerrero, the cardinal said it was important that "he continues to have the support of the pope and that he is not thwarted the way I was thwarted."

The Catholic Weekly sent questions to the Australian Federal Police and Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre but did not receive responses before its deadline.

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