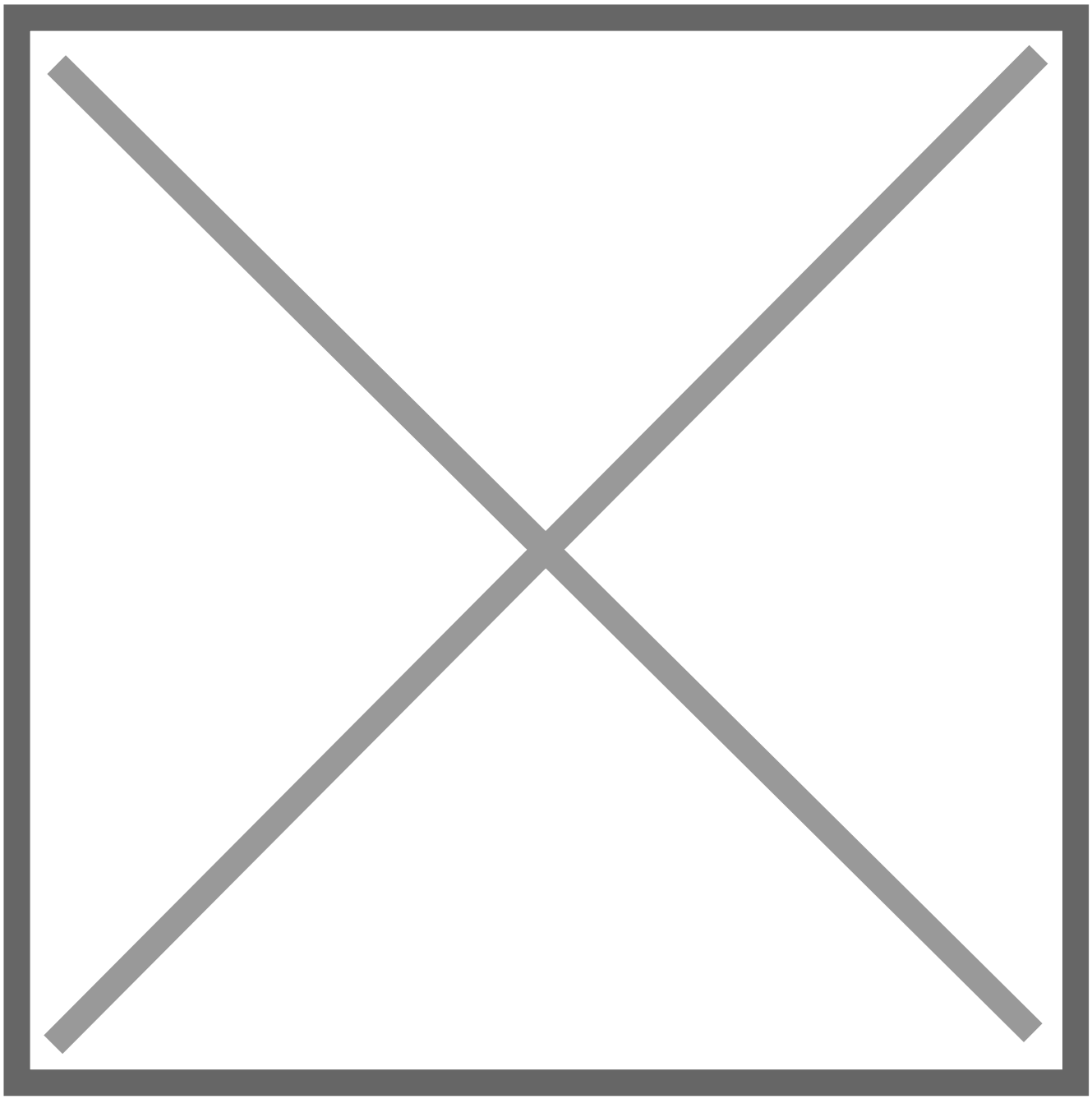
Vatican



Two of the three judges of the Vatican City State criminal court -- Giuseppe Pignatone and Carlo Bonzano -- listen as a defense lawyer speaks in a makeshift Vatican courtroom July 27, 2021, as the trial of 10 defendants in a financial malfeasance case began. Cardinal Angelo Becciu is among the defendants. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Vatican City — July 29, 2021
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On the first day of his trial at the Vatican, Cardinal Angelo Becciu turned to members of the press behind him to comment on the grueling seven-hour hearing.

"I am serene, I feel calm in my conscience, I have faith that the judges will know well the facts, and my great hope is that certainty they will recognize my innocence," Becciu said July 27 after the hearing concluded.

During the trial, however, the cardinal's lawyers questioned the fairness of the accusations against him, saying that he was not given the opportunity to give a statement to prosecutors during their investigation, while Msgr. Alberto Perlasca, the former head of the Vatican Secretariat of State's administrative office, went from suspect to star witness.

According to the indictment, Perlasca, whose office and home were raided by Vatican police during their investigation, provided investigators "with a precious contribution for the reconstruction of some central moments relating to the case of the London property."

The Vatican's chief prosecutor countered the claims about flipping a suspect, saying that it was Perlasca who had approached them on several occasions to give his testimony.

Becciu's lawyers also argued that they had yet to receive the full contents of Perlasca's testimony. Vatican judges ordered the prosecution to provide video tapes of his testimony to defense lawyers by Aug. 10.

Unsurprisingly, Becciu, who has filed lawsuits against several news agencies for libel and/or defamation, announced that he instructed his lawyers to file a similar lawsuit against Perlasca.

However, he also announced a lawsuit against an old foe: Francesca Immacolata Chaouqui, a member of the now-defunct Pontifical Commission for Reference on the Economic-Administrative Structure of the Holy See.

For many, the reappearance of Chaouqui, who was found guilty by a Vatican court in 2016 of leaking confidential documents about Vatican finances, added an unforeseen twist worthy of a modern-day court drama or soap opera.

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According to the 488-page indictment, Chaouqui "spontaneously presented herself" at the offices of the Vatican Gendarmerie on Oct. 28, 2019, several weeks after Vatican police raided the offices of the Secretariat of State and the financial oversight office, formerly known as the Financial Information Authority or AIF.

The day after the raid, the Italian magazine L'Espresso published what it said was an internal notice from the Vatican police barring certain individuals from entering Vatican City State and alleged that the raid was part of a Vatican investigation into how the Secretariat of State used $200 million to finance a property development project in London's Chelsea district in 2014.

"In addition to some important details regarding the figure of His Eminence Rev. Angelo Becciu, Francesca Immacolata Chaouqui, referring to the leak of information regarding the documents published by L'Espresso, stated that she was certain that the leak came from a source inside AIF," the indictment stated.

No longer tied to the Vatican after she was given a 10-month suspended sentence, Chaouqui has remained active on social media, commenting and speculating over Vatican intrigue.

Dubbed by the Italian media as *La Papessa* ("The Female Pope") -- a nickname she has since adopted, at times tweeting the hashtag #teampapessa -- the tone of Chaouqui's statements have changed little from the time of her trial.

She often claimed that she was trying to help the pope and, for that, was a victim of power plays and internal strife by members of the Roman Curia allegedly opposed to financial reform, particularly Becciu, whom she blamed for her arrest in the leak scandal.

In a declaration made to the court during her 2016 trial, Chaouqui said then-Archbishop Becciu "promoted the arrests" and that he "pushed for and wanted" the trial to end in her conviction.

Her statement prompted a rare denial from then-Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, who denied her accusations that Becciu, the former chief of staff within the the Secretariat of State, acted "unfairly toward her."

"It has therefore become necessary -- without desiring in any way to condition the action of the court -- to deny, in a most absolute way, such accusations and to state that, since they are calumnious affirmations, they are absolutely unacceptable, and subject to legal action," the statement said.

While it is believed that Becciu's lawsuit against Chaouqui is due to her 2019 deposition to Vatican police, she also has spoken to various Italian media outlets about the cardinal's current legal troubles, implying that Perlasca chose not to be the cardinal's "fall guy."

In a July 14 interview with Italian magazine Panorama, Chaouqui said Perlasca "was faced with a difficult choice: to either protect the cardinal as he did in his first interrogation or to speak the truth to protect the interests of the Holy See and of the Holy Father."