News



Cardinal Angelo Becciu talks to journalists during a press conference in Rome, on Sept. 25, 2020. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia, File)

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VATICAN CITY — A once-powerful cardinal testified Thursday that he donated 125,000 euros ($140,000) of Vatican money to a Sardinian diocese for purely charitable reasons, rejecting Vatican prosecutors' claims that the money benefitted his brother who ran the charity.

Cardinal Angelo Becciu, the first-ever cardinal to testify before the Vatican's criminal tribunal, said he couldn't deny that his brother Antonino Becciu was the legal representative of the Spes charity, which is the operational arm of the Diocese of Ozieri's Caritas charity operation.

But Becciu insisted that Spes had a long track record of doing good works in his home diocese, and that the donations of Holy See money, which he was authorized to distribute, responded to verifiable needs requested by the Ozieri bishop: One initiative concerned rebuilding a burned-down bakery that employed disadvantaged youths, while another was to build a multi-use social center for the poor.

Prosecutors have accused Becciu of embezzling Holy See funds and placed him on trial along with nine other people accused of defrauding the Vatican of tens of millions of euros, much of the money donations from the faithful. The key focus of the trial concerns the Vatican's 350-million-euro investment in a London real estate venture, but the trial also encompasses unrelated investigations, including Becciu's Sardinian donations. The 10 defendants have denied wrongdoing.

Becciu, who was once the powerful No. 2 in the Vatican secretariat of state, had been scheduled as the first suspect to be questioned on the stand Thursday.

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But Prosecutor Alessandro Diddi, who has spearheaded the Vatican investigation for nearly three years, advised the court that he wasn't prepared for the interrogation. Diddi cited other work that had taken up his time and cases of COVID-19 in his office that left him unprepared to question Becciu.

As a result, Becciu read an introductory statement to the court, insisting on his innocence and denouncing the "violent, vulgar" media campaign that erupted against him after Pope Francis forced his resignation in September 2020.

Francis yanked Becciu's rights and privileges as a cardinal based on preliminary reports he had received about the wiring of Holy See funds to the Spes charity. Becciu hadn't yet been placed under investigation by Vatican prosecutors, but his very public downfall prompted months of salacious news reports in the Italian media.

Some reports accused him of plotting to finance the sex abuse prosecution against his nemesis Cardinal George Pell, others accused him of having intimate relations with another defendant, while still others delved into his family's businesses.

"I have been described as a corrupt man. Greedy for money. Disloyal to the pope. Concerned only with the welfare of my family," Becciu told the court Thursday. "They have insinuated infamy on the integrity of my priestly life, having financed witnesses in a trial against a confrere, even being the owner of oil wells or tax havens."

"Absurd accusations. Incredible. Grotesque. Monstrous. One wonders who wanted all this and for what purpose," he said.

Becciu insisted that his conscience was clear, that he had always acted in the interest of the Holy See, never intended any Vatican money to be misused, and trusted the Vatican tribunal would arrive at the truth.

Responding to a few questions from Judge Giuseppe Pignatone, Becciu insisted he didn't know how the Ozieri diocesan bank accounts were organized and merely wired the funds to the IBAN account number indicated by the bishop.

Becciu is to return to the stand on April 6 for further questioning, including surrounding his hiring of a purported Sardinian intelligence analyst as an external Vatican consultant to negotiate the freedom of Catholic hostages in Africa.

Becciu authorized more than half a million euros in payments to the analyst which, according to bank records, went to buy furniture and high-end luxury items.

Becciu has so far refused to discuss his dealings with Cecilia Marogna, citing the pontifical secret. Pignatone ruled Thursday that the tribunal would ask the Vatican secretariat of state to weigh in on whether Becciu could be released from the pontifical secret to testify about Marogna, who has also cited official secrecy in refusing to be interrogated.