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Vatican



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

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May 20, 2022

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VATICAN CITY — The Vatican's financial trial took a series of surreal turns Thursday when a former suspect-turned-star witness was thrown out of the tribunal and a defendant asserted in court documents that she escorted two emissaries of Russian President Vladimir Putin into the Holy See to negotiate the return of holy relics to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The developments turned an otherwise mundane cross-examination of a onetime Vatican power broker about the Vatican's investment strategies into an unexpected drama. It underscored the peculiarity of the trial and the remarkable situation the Holy See found itself in after entrusting delicate diplomatic, financial and intelligence work to outsiders who who got in the door by impressing a cardinal.

The trial originated in the Holy See's 350 million euro investment in a London real estate deal, but it has expanded to include other alleged crimes. Vatican prosecutors have accused 10 people of fraud, embezzlement and abuse of office, and some of extorting the Vatican of 15 million euros to get control of the London building.

One of the original prime suspects in the London deal, Monsignor Alberto Perlasca, turned into the prosecution's star witness after he flipped and started revealing all that he knew about other defendants. He is now asserting that he is a victim of the crime and entitled to damages, and showed up unannounced at the tribunal Thursday only to be thrown out by the chief judge.

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Also Thursday, lawyers for defendant Cecilia Marogna filed a personal statement in which she explained her intelligence work on behalf of the Holy See in terms that read more like a James Bond job description. She said her work included contacts with Russian emissaries, meetings with Italian intelligence agents, and regular updates with the secret service chiefs of Colombia, Burkina Faso and Mali, all in a bid to free a Colombian nun who had been kidnapped by al-Qaida-linked militants in Mali.

Marogna is accused of embezzling some 575,000 euros in Holy See money that had been apparently been intended to free the nun. Marogna asserts the money was compensation and fees related to her intelligence work. Prosecutors say Marogna

spent the money on Prada, Tod's and other high-end luxury goods.

Marogna's co-defendant, Cardinal Angelo Becciu, has already testified that he engaged Marogna as an external security consultant, impressed by her grasp of geopolitical affairs, and turned to her for help following the February 2017 kidnapping of Sister Gloria Cecilia Narvaez in Mali. She had been kidnapped by al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, which has bankrolled its insurgency by kidnapping Westerners.

Becciu revealed during testimony earlier this month that Francis approved spending up to 1 million euros to hire a British intelligence firm to find the nun and secure her freedom. She was ultimately freed last year.

Marogna insisted the money wasn't ransom, but rather payment to the British firm, Inkerman, for its services. She said Inkerman had estimated the total cost to free the nun would amount to 17 million euros. She said her negotiations hit a series of snags after the Vatican police chief got wind of it, COVID-19 hit and her Italian intelligence intermediary was unexpectedly promoted.

In her statement, Marogna said the negotiations for the relics of St. Nicholas, which are held in the southern city of Bari, fell apart after the local Bari bishop refused to give them up permanently. They had been loaned to Russia for two months in 2017, after a deal was reached between Pope Francis and the Russian Patriarch Kirill after their 2016 meeting in Havana.

Marogna's narrative couldn't be independently confirmed. She said she never had any contract with the Holy See for her services and was never asked to provide any receipts of how she accounted for her expenses.