Vatican

Cardinal Angelo Becciu speaks with journalists during a news conference in Rome in this Sept

Cardinal Angelo Becciu speaks with journalists during a news conference in Rome in this Sept. 25, 2020, file photo. (CNS photo/Guglielmo Mangiapane, Reuters)

Nicole Winfield

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Associated Press

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Pope Francis has taken another step to rehabilitate Cardinal Angelo Becciu, inviting the once-powerful Vatican prelate to participate in an upcoming meeting of cardinals two years after Francis forced his resignation based on purported financial improprieties.

Becciu, 74, is currently on trial in the Vatican's criminal tribunal, accused of sending 125,000 euros (US$125,000) in Holy See funds to a charity run by his brother, among other financial charges. He has denied wrongdoing.

Becciu told supporters in his native Sardinia that Francis had phoned him on Aug. 20 and invited him to participate in the Aug. 29-30 meeting of cardinals at the Vatican, the first such gathering since 2015. Becciu's lawyers, Fabio Viglione and Maria Concetta Marzo, confirmed the invitation in a statement on Aug. 22 to The Associated Press; the Vatican spokesman didn't immediately comment.

The invitation is significant given Francis revoked Becciu's rights and privileges as a cardinal, and secured his resignation as head of the Vatican's saint-making office, in

2020 based on what Francis said was evidence Becciu had embezzled Holy See funds. As a result, Becciu hasn't participated in any public liturgies, audiences or other events at the Vatican and wouldn't be eligible to participate in a conclave to elect a new pope.

At the time of his removal, Becciu wasn't under criminal investigation but the Vatican nevertheless made his downfall public, prompting months of salacious news reports in the Italian media. Becciu was indicted nearly a year later along with nine other people accused of other charges in the Vatican's botched London real estate deal.

During the trial, Becciu told the Vatican tribunal that as the No. 2 in the secretariat of state, he had the authority to donate Holy See funds to charity and had sent the money at the request of the bishop of Ozieri for a diocesan charity that provides work to unemployed Sardinian youths. Becciu said the money had remained in the dioceses' bank account awaiting further funding, and was not accessed by his brother.

Becciu is also accused of witness tampering and abuse of office, which he also denies.

The invitation to participate in the consistory is the second significant gesture Francis has made that suggests a reconsideration over his hasty decision Sept. 24, 2020, to publicly yank Becciu's rights as a cardinal and force his resignation.

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In April 2021, Francis went to Becciu's home to celebrate Holy Thursday Mass with him and has subsequently said he hopes "with all my heart" that Becciu is found innocent.

Becciu, for his part, has repeatedly held to his obedience to the pontiff, attending nearly every hearing of his trial and refusing to answer questions in his own defense until he was released by Francis from the pontifical secret.

Francis' ouster of Becciu, and his hands-on intervention in the investigation leading to the trial, prompted defense arguments that suspects can't get a fair trial in an absolute monarchy where the pope wields supreme legislative, executive and

judicial power — and had exercised all of those powers on behalf of the prosecution during the investigation.

The tribunal president rejected their arguments.

The trial, which began a year ago, is set to resume after a summer recess on Sept. 28.

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