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Italian communications expert Francesca Chaouqui talks to journalists July 7, 2016, after a Vatican court convicted her and a Vatican monsignor for having conspired to pass documents to two Italian journalist. A Vatican trial into a money-losing investment has been jolted by revelations that a key prosecution witness was apparently manipulated into changing his story and cooperating with prosecutors. (AP Photo/Domenico Stinellis, File)

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The text message to the Vatican monsignor offered forgiveness along with a threat: "I know everything about you … and I keep it all in my archives," it read. "I pardon you, Perlasca, but remember, you owe me a favor."

The message was one of more than 100 newly revealed WhatsApp texts and other correspondence entered into evidence at the Vatican courthouse last week that have jolted a financial crimes trial involving the Holy See's money-losing investment in a London property.

The texts have cast doubt on the credibility of a key suspect-turned-prosecution witness and raised questions about the integrity of the investigation into the London deal and other transactions.

Together with evidence that a cardinal secretly recorded Pope Francis, they confirmed that a trial originally aimed at highlighting Francis' financial reforms has become a Pandora's Box of unintended revelations about Vatican vendettas and scheming.

The trial in the city-state's criminal tribunal originated in the Holy See's 350 million-euro investment to develop a former warehouse for department store Harrods into luxury apartments.

Prosecutors have accused 10 people in the case, alleging Vatican monsignors and brokers fleeced the Holy See of tens of millions of euros in fees and commissions, and then extorted the Holy See of 15 million euros to get full control of the property.

Msgr. Alberto Perlasca initially was among the prime suspects. As the Vatican official who managed the secretariat of state's 600 million-euro asset portfolio, he was intimately involved in the property deal.

But Perlasca changed his story in August 2020 and started cooperating with prosecutors, blaming his deputy and his superior, Cardinal Angelo Becciu, then the

No. 2 in the secretariat of state, for the London investment and other questionable expenditures.

Both the deputy and Becciu are on trial. Perlasca is not, and his statements to prosecutors became a source of leads that formed the basis of several charges in the indictment.

When Perlasca testified for the prosecution last week, some of his claims collapsed under defense questioning. Judge Giuseppe Pignatone gave Perlasca until midweek to remember who helped him write his first tell-all memo on Aug. 31, 2020.

And then came a bombshell, courtesy of the text messages that the prosecutor was compelled to introduce into evidence after he received them. They suggested Perlasca wrote the memo implicating his boss after he had received threats and advice from a woman who had an ax to grind against Becciu.

Public relations specialist Francesca Chaouqui previously served on a papal commission tasked with investigating the Vatican's vast and murky financials. She is known in Vatican circles for her role in the "Vatileaks" scandal of 2015-2016, when she was convicted of conspiring to leak confidential Vatican documents to journalists and received a 10-month suspended sentence.

According to the texts, Chaouqui nurtured a grudge against Becciu, whom she blamed for allegedly supporting her prosecution. She apparently saw the investigation into the London real estate venture as a chance to settle scores and implicate Becciu in alleged wrongdoing she had uncovered during her commission days.

"I knew that sooner or later the moment would come and I would send you this message," Chaouqui wrote Perlasca on May 12, 2020. "Because the Lord doesn't allow the good to be humiliated without repair. I pardon you Perlasca, but remember, you owe me a favor."

Chaouqui didn't say what she wanted. But other messages unveiled in court indicate she persuaded a Perlasca family friend and confidante, Genoveffa Ciferri, that she could help Perlasca avoid prosecution if he followed Chaouqui's advice.

According to Ciferri's texts, the elaborate scheme allegedly unfolded as follows: Ciferri believed Chaouqui when she bragged that she was working hand-in-hand with

Vatican prosecutors, gendarmes and the pope in the criminal investigation. Ciferri wanted to help Perlasca, and so fed him Chaouqui's advice anonymously.

Chaouqui subsequently organized a dinner at a Rome restaurant during which Perlasca tried to extract incriminating information from Becciu. Perlasca was led to believe the Vatican prosecutors had bugged the table and were recording their conversation, though no recording has materialized. He provided them with a detailed memo after the Sept. 6, 2020 meal.

The dinner took place 18 days before Francis fired Becciu and stripped him of his rights as a cardinal based on information he said he had received about Becciu's alleged financial misconduct.

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Ciferri confessed the whole saga to prosecutor Alessandro Diddi in a Nov. 26 text in which she said she had schemed with Chaouqui in hopes of sparing Perlasca from becoming a criminal defendant. Ciferri forwarded Diddi 126 text messages she exchanged with Chaouqui and said Chaouqui had helped craft the August 2020 memo in which Perlasca turned on the cardinal.

The implications of Chaouqui's alleged interference were clear to those in the courtroom: Perlasca, a key prosecution witness, may have been persuaded to provide possibly false testimony about Becciu and others by someone with a not-so-hidden agenda. In addition, Chaouqui bragged about working closely with investigators on the case.

Becciu's lawyer, Fabio Viglione, denounced the "surreal" machinations that helped lead to his client's indictment, saying Perlasca had been manipulated "to the detriment of the truth, the authenticity of the investigation and the honorability of His Eminence."

Cataldo Intrieri, the lawyer representing Perlasca's deputy Fabrizio Tirabassi, said the revelations warrant the trial's suspension and the opening of a new criminal investigation for suspected fraud, threats and obstruction. "Regardless, there are implications for the facts that are the subject of this trial," Intrieri said.

Judge Pignatone rejected defense calls to suspend the trial, saying the proceedings were based more on documentation about the London deal than Perlasca's testimony. But he scheduled in-court interrogations for Ciferri and Chaouqui.

Chaouqui, when reached by The Associated Press, declined to comment before her court testimony.

Diddi defended the investigation, strongly denied having any dealings with Chaouqui before she was questioned in July and announced he had opened a new investigation into possible false testimony and other potential crimes based on the texts he received from Ciferri. He offered to turn over his cell phone to show he had no dealings with Chaouqui.

"If someone brags about having knowledge [of the investigation] I have to investigate," he said.

Some defense lawyers also privately complained that Diddi had evidence in February 2021 of Chaouqui's alleged involvement with Perlasca but didn't inform the defense, part of broader defense complaints about the peculiarities of the Vatican's legal system. Diddi acknowledged last week that Ciferri phone him on Feb. 4, 2021 and mentioned Chaouqui's name.

Diddi also heard from Perlasca on March 1, 2022, when the monsignor filed a formal complaint alleging Chaouqui had threatened him and claimed to be working with prosecutors. The written complaint was only entered into evidence last week. Defense lawyers said it was their first inkling that Perlasca might be a compromised prosecution witness.

"She sent me threatening messages via telephone, saying I was in her hands and that only she could save me from certain prison, making clear she could influence the investigators," Perlasca wrote in his complaint.

Chaouqui was in touch with Perlasca as recently as Nov. 26. She texted him after his first court appearances and suggested they meet before he went back on the stand.

"My interest, and I think yours, is that my support not emerge at trial because it would be difficult to explain above all the consequences that it had," she wrote.