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Two cherubs and a gilded angel, which is 13 feet tall, stand on top of the wooden canopy of the baldachin over the main altar of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in this undated photo. (CNS/Fabbrica di San Pietro)



Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js

Catholic News Service

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Vatican City — June 7, 2024
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A former employee of St. Peter's Basilica is in Vatican custody after allegedly being caught in a Vatican-orchestrated sting operation involving the sale of a manuscript by Italian baroque master Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

The suspect, a former employee of the Fabbrica di San Pietro — the office responsible for the basilica's upkeep — reportedly attempted to sell an 18-page manuscript, which had been missing from its archives, back to the basilica.

The Italian newspaper Domani first published news of the arrest June 6, and it was later confirmed by the Vatican prosecutor's office.

Though it is not clear where the manuscript was obtained, Domani reported that the suspect was arrested May 27 after a fabricated transaction in which Cardinal Mauro Gambetti, archpriest of St. Peter's Basilica, exchanged a check for 120,000 euros (about $130,700) for the manuscript. Upon leaving the meeting with the cardinal, the suspect was taken into custody, interrogated and arrested.

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According to Vatican News, the manuscript is said to describe specifications for gilding the friezes on the more than 90-foot-tall baldachin, or canopy, that towers over the main altar of St. Peter's Basilica; the baldachin was designed and constructed by Bernini in the early 17th century.

The manuscript reappeared in 2021 when a photocopy of it was used in a book on Bernini. The suspect was the editor of the volume and after its publication began negotiations with the basilica to sell the manuscript, Vatican News reported.

It added that the suspect is currently being held in custody by the Vatican gendarmes and has undergone two interrogations. Alessandro Diddi, the Vatican's chief prosecutor, is expected to reach a decision about the indictment during the week of June 10.