Vatican

Vatican News



Public relations specialist Francesca Chaouqui talks to reporters as she arrives to testify in a trial at the Vatican, Jan. 13, 2023. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

Nicole Winfield

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — September 22, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Defense lawyers in the Holy See's "trial of the century" asked the Vatican prosecutor to recuse himself from the appeals trial Monday, arguing he was implicated in questionable behavior according to years of private WhatsApp messages that have shaken the proceedings.

Prosecutor Alessandro Diddi has a conflict of interest that should preclude him from heading the prosecution, the lawyers said in separate motions on the opening day of the appeals trial.

The tribunal president, Archbishop Alejandro Arellano Cedillo, accepted the motions and ordered Diddi to respond within three days, underscoring how the chats have shifted the ground under the Vatican's most ambitious and high-profile prosecution of alleged financial misconduct.

The trial concerning the Vatican's 350 million euro ($412 million) investment in a London property resulted in the 2023 conviction of nine people on a host of finance-related charges. The star defendant was Cardinal Angelo Becciu, once a close confidante of Pope Francis and a future papal contender. He fell from grace after Francis fired him and leveled an accusation of financial misconduct before he was charged.

The investigation took a crucial turn in August 2020 when the prime suspect in the London deal, Msgr. Alberto Perlasca, changed his story and turned on his onetime boss, Becciu. Perlasca escaped indictment and became a prime prosecution witness.

Recently, thousands of pages of WhatsApp texts and audio messages have provided the backstory to Perlasca's changed position. They suggest questionable behavior by Vatican police, Diddi and Francis himself.

They document a behind-the-scenes effort by two women, Francesca Chaouqui and Genevieve Ciferri, to target the cardinal by persuading Perlasca to turn on him. While the claims are unverified, the defense has seized on them as evidence that the investigation was contaminated from the start and the defendants couldn't get a fair trial in the Vatican, an absolute monarchy where Francis intervened on behalf of prosecutors.

The existence of the messages first jolted the trial in 2022 when Diddi told the court that Ciferri had forwarded him 126 chats she exchanged with Chaouqui. Diddi

entered the messages into evidence but redacted all but eight, prompting defense complaints that he was withholding crucial evidence.

Advertisement

After the sentences were handed down, Ciferri gave all the chats plus thousands of other exchanges over four years to lawyers for another defendant and they have continued circulating.

The additional content shows Diddi had more than 126 chats in 2022 and that Ciferri continued forwarding him content for four days. Diddi said he blocked her after the first night. The additional chats suggest Diddi had "irregular contacts" with Perlasca, the defense said.

The defense lawyers also cited an audio file suggesting Vatican Police Commissioner Stefano De Santis gave Chaouqui advice to Perlasca about how to implicate others when he was still a suspect. After Perlasca changed his story, he not only escaped prosecution but was listed as an injured party in the trial and became a prosecutor in another Vatican court.

"We do not yet know whether what emerges from the chats and audio recordings is true, but it is certain that they seem to reveal — except for possible boasts, which must be verified — a disturbing direct or indirect involvement of the investigators," in conditioning Perlasca's testimony, lawyers for the four main defendants wrote in a motion demanding Diddi recuse himself.

During Monday's hearing in a frescoed courtroom in the Apostolic Palace, Diddi thanked the defense for providing the opportunity to respond to the allegations and said he would take the three days to "express my thoughts calmly, in order to dispel the doubts that have arisen in recent months about the conduct of the investigation."

He then left the tribunal and other prosecutors took over.

If Diddi doesn't recuse himself, the matter will go before the Vatican high Court of Cassation headed by American Cardinal Kevin Farrell, a Francis protege and appointee.

In his role as camerlengo, Farrell reportedly produced a letter from Francis after his death making clear the late pope didn't want Becciu to participate in the conclave to elect his successor.