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Vatican denies corruption charges attributed to U.S. nuncio

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 26, 2012 NCR Today

The Vatican this morning dismissed as ?biased and banal? a broadcast on Italian television yesterday evening suggesting that a senior church official, who is today the pope?s ambassador in the United States, issued a blunt warning to Benedict XVI in March 2011 about financial corruption in the Vatican.

A Vatican spokesperson also appeared to threaten legal action against the broadcast, which named a handful of senior officials and financial advisors in the Vatican as involved in alleged mismanagement and lack of adequate financial controls.

tThe broadcast, which appeared on one of Italy?s leading commercial networks, focused on Italian Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, named in October as Benedict?s new nuncio to the United States. Prior to that position, Viganò had served as the number two official in the government of the Vatican city-state, where he earned a reputation as a financial reformer.

tReportedly, Viganò?s insistence on centralized accounting procedures and accountability for cost overruns helped turn a U.S. $10.5 million deficit for the city-state into a surplus of $44 million in the span of a year.

tIt had already been widely reported that Viganò?s new controls produced backlash among administrators of individual departments, such as the Vatican museums and Vatican gardens, long accustomed to operating in semi-autonomous fashion. Several analysts suggested that Viganò?s transfer to the United States amounted to a face-saving way of resolving these internal tensions.

tLast night?s broadcast, however, claimed to reveal a private letter allegedly written by Viganò to Benedict XVI last spring, in an effort to head off his removal. Its key line is the following: ?My transfer would provoke confusion among all those who?ve believed that it?s possible to clean up so many situations of corruption and dishonesty.?

tAccording to the broadcast, that letter was dated March 27, 2011, roughly six months before Viganò was sent to the United States. Notably, today?s Vatican statement expressed ?bitterness? over the disclosure of private documents, but did not dispute the letter?s authenticity.

tThe program also quoted another letter allegedly sent to the pope, in which Viganò reportedly wrote of the financial procedures in the Vatican city-state, ?I would never have imagined finding myself in such a disastrous situation,? which he called ?unimaginable,? and further asserted that ?everyone in the curia knows it.?

tThis morning, the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, issued a lengthy statement in response to the broadcast. The following is the full text of that statement, in an NCR translation from Italian.

As it happens, the Vatican also announced this morning its ratification of three United Nations conventions intended to curb corrupt financial transactions: one concerning illicit traffic in narcotics, another on repressing the financing of international terrorism, and a third on organized trans-national crime.

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NOTE OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE PRESS OFFICE OF THE HOLY SEE, FR. FEDERICO LOMBARDI S.J., REGARDING A TELEVISION PROGRAM

The television program ?The Untouchables? broadcast yesterday evening, accompanied by the usual assortment of articles and commentary, could be the object of multiple considerations, beginning with the debatable methods and the journalistic expedients with which it was realized, and continuing with bitterness for the diffusion of private documents. But this is not, for now, what we principally want to talk about, as this sort of thing has become all too familiar, both as a general method and as a style of biased information with regard to the Vatican and the Catholic church. We propose instead two simple considerations which have not been given space in the discussion.

First, the action undertaken by Monsignor Viganò as Secretary General of the Government certainly had many positive aspects, contributing to a style of leadership characterized by the quest for administrative rigor, for savings, and for straightening out a generally difficult economic situation. These results, obtained during the presidency of Cardinal Lajolo, are clear, and aren?t denied by anyone. A more adequate evaluation, however, would require taking into consideration the ups and downs of the markets, of investment criteria in recent years, as well as keeping in mind other important circumstances ? for instance, the notable results of the activity of the Vatican Museums, with an increased influx of visitors and more ample opening hours. It?s also important to remember the non-economic aims of the Vatican city-state, which are of support to the mission of the universal church and which require significant expenses, and so on.

tFurther, certain accusations, including some which are extremely serious, made in the course of the program ? in particular, those against members of the Finance and Administration Committee of the Government of the City-State, and against the Secretariat of State and His Holiness -- require the Secretariat of State and the Government of the city-state to pursue all appropriate options, including, if necessary, legal remedies, in order to defend the honor of persons of moral integrity and recognized professionalism, who loyally serve the church, the pope, and the common good.

tIn any case, the positive criteria of correct and healthy administration and of transparency, which inspired Monsignor Viganò, certainly continue to be those which also guide the current officials of the Government, in their demonstrated competence and integrity. That?s consistent with the aim of ever greater transparency and trustworthiness, and of attentive control of economic activity, to which the Holy See is clearly committed, the difficulties notwithstanding ? as is demonstrated even today, by coincidence, with the news of adhesion to international conventions. In sum, the change in leadership of the Government certainly is not intended as a step back with respect to transparency and rigor, but another step forward.

tSecond, discussions and tensions, including understandable differences of opinion and positions, are subjected to the evaluation of higher authority precisely because these authorities are in a position to see the questions in broader perspective, and with more comprehensive criteria. A difficult procedure of discernment about various aspects of the exercise of government in a complex and differentiated institution such as the Government of the Vatican City-State ? which cannot be limited simply to matters of appropriate administrative rigor ? was presented instead in a partial and banal way, evidently exalting the negative aspects. The easy result is presenting the structures of government of the church not so much as touched by human frailty, which would be easily understandable, but as deeply characterized by fights, divisions, and interest group struggles. On this point, we say without fear that [the broadcast] went, as they often go, well beyond reality; that the general situation of the Government is not as negative as they want to make people believe; and that a great deal of disinformation cannot obscure the daily and serene effort in view of ever great transparency of all the Vatican institutions.

tFinally, it must not be forgotten that the Government of the Church has at its top a Pontiff of deep and prudent judgment, who, beyond any doubt, merits the serenity and the trust which those who work for the church and all the faithful rightly expect. In this sense, it should also be decisively reaffirmed that entrusting the position of nuncio in the United States to Monsignor Viganò, one of the most important duties in all of Vatican diplomacy given the importance of both the country and of the Catholic church in the United States, is proof of the pope?s unquestionable esteem and trust.

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