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Vatican leaks scandal rolls on

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In the latest round of the Vatican leaks scandal, an Italian newspaper on Wednesday published two confidential letters documenting a failed 2011 effort by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's powerful Secretary of State, to take control of an important Italian Catholic university and hospital system.

Release of the documents is seen as another embarrassment for Bertone, whose effectiveness had already been called into question by the leaks scandal and other episodes since Benedict XVI named Bertone to the position in 2006.

The letters, and their aftermath, also document a case in which Pope Benedict XVI sided with local bishops against an attempt to centralize additional ecclesiastical power in the Vatican.

The tug-of-war centers on the Giuseppe Toniolo Institute of Superior Studies, effectively the governing body for the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, a sprawling academic operation based in Milan but with outposts up and down Italy. Its affiliated institutions include the famed Gemelli Clinic in Rome, where a private suite of rooms is always reserved for the pope.

Sacred Heart University is the largest private university in Europe and one of the most distinguished Catholic universities in the world, encompassing fourteen major academic departments, 1,400 faculty members, and some 7,000 employees.

Although tensions over the Toniolo Institute were widely reported a year ago, this is the first time Bertone's February 2011 letter to the then-Cardinal of Milan, Dionigi Tettamanzi, ordering him to step down as president of the institute and to appoint Bertone's chosen successor, has been published.

Bertone's intervention was widely seen as an attempt to wrest control of the institute for the Vatican, and

away from the Italian bishops, during the early 2011 transition in Milan from Tettamanzi to Cardinal Angelo Scola, the powerful Italian prelate whom many observers see as a leading candidate to succeed Benedict XVI.

On April 30, 2011, one day before the May 1 beatification of Pope John Paul II, Tettamanzi met with Benedict XVI to protest Bertone's attempted take-over. In the end, Benedict sided with Tettamanzi, and no changes were made in the Toniolo Institute prior to Scola's arrival in Milan.

In effect, the decision meant that control of Sacred Heart University remained with the Italian bishops rather than passing to the Vatican's Secretariat of State.

In broad strokes, three things seem significant for non-Italians about this latest round of Vatican leaks.

First, the dispute over the Toniolo Institute is a rare case in which Benedict XVI actually sided against Bertone, his longtime friend and aide who served under the future pope in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In that sense, it suggests that Benedict's support and esteem for Bertone, which the pope has made clear on multiple occasions, is nevertheless not unlimited.

Second, this is a case in which a pope has sided with local bishops in efforts to defend their autonomy against the Vatican, despite perceptions of a trend towards Roman centralization in recent decades. Aside from Benedict's broad views on church governance, his reluctance to change the status quo may also reflect the fact that Bertone's move was seen as threatening to another of Benedict's closest friends and supporters, Scola.

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Third, this latest round of confidential Vatican documents to hit the press suggests that the 'Vati-leaks' scandal is not yet over - either because personnel inside the Vatican are continuing to leak material, or because the material has already been leaked, in bulk, and is being selectively rolled out by media outlets.

In either case, the forecast would seem to be for more revelations yet to come.

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