

Vatican to begin trial of computer tech accused of helping papal butler

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A second criminal trial opens Monday in the little courtroom on the ground floor of the Vatican's tribunal building, located just behind the apse of St. Peter's Basilica.

Claudio Sciarpelletti, a computer technician in the Vatican Secretariat of State, is to be tried on charges of aiding and abetting Paolo Gabriele, the papal butler, who was convicted of aggravated theft for stealing or photocopying private Vatican correspondence -- including letters to and from the pope.

The Vatican court's indictment of Sciarpelletti was released Aug. 13 along with the indictment of Gabriele.

The papal butler was arrested May 23 after a police search of his Vatican apartment turned up hundreds of sensitive documents, including many that had been leaked to an Italian journalist. Informed of "continual contacts" between Gabriele and Sciarpelletti, the Vatican court authorized a search May 25 of Sciarpelletti's office in the Secretariat of State, the indictment said.

Sciarpelletti himself led police to their key piece of evidence against him: an envelope in his desk. On the outside of the envelope was written: "Personal: P. Gabriele," the court said. The back of the envelope was marked with the secretariat's seal.

The computer tech was arrested May 25 and held by Vatican security overnight. According to the court documents, his descriptions of his relationship with Gabriele and of the origin and destination of the envelope changed several times over the course of the investigation.

Originally, Sciarpelletti was accused of giving false testimony, conspiracy to commit aggravated theft, aiding and abetting a thief and violating the secrets of his office.

The Vatican court said Sciarpelletti first claimed he knew Gabriele only in passing, but it turned out the two communicated frequently and saw each other -- with their wives and children -- socially as well as at work. He initially said Gabriele gave him the envelope "a couple years ago," asking him to read it and let him know what he thought. The next day, he said that the envelope was given to him by someone identified in the indictment only as "W," and that he was supposed to pass it on to Gabriele.

"The contrasting version of facts furnished by the accused Claudio Sciarpelletti may have hindered the investigation," the indictment said. However, the charges were reduced to "aiding and abetting," which is the closest crime the Vatican has to an accusation of being an accessory after the fact.

The arrest and trial of Gabriele made headlines around the world, and newspapers carried photographs of him on duty before his arrest riding in the front of the popemobile and assisting the pope with his coat. But Sciarpelletti is not known publicly, and Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, said the Vatican court already has accepted a request from the defense that there be no television cameras or photographers -- not

even the Vatican's own -- in the courtroom.

During the Gabriele trial, the three-judge panel hearing the case severely limited any testimony about the contents of the documents Gabriele was accused of stealing and leaking to an Italian journalist. Many of documents that were published concern financial mismanagement, corruption and careerism in the Vatican.

In the indictment, the Vatican court said that among the papers in the envelope Sciarpelletti had was an account titled "Napoleon in the Vatican," which appears in the book published by Gianluigi Nuzzi, the journalist who received documents from Gabriele.

The account focuses on how Domenico Giani, the head of Vatican security, quickly and quietly dealt with an incident in which a vehicle with Vatican license plates was hit by four .22-caliber bullets while parked at a Rome restaurant where Vatican police were eating with colleagues from Interpol. In the end, the incident was attributed to an unknown person with emotional problems who saw the Vatican license plates and started shooting. A restaurant employee who heard the shots reportedly told police he thought they were fireworks.

"Napoleon in the Vatican" also talks about two Vatican police officers and a staff member who reportedly own shares in Italian security firms. Nuzzi says "conflicts of interest" could arise in the future if the Vatican were to ever enter into business with the firms.

Sciarpelletti's attorney already has called Giani and Gianluca Gauzzi Broccoletti, one of the police officers, as witnesses in the trial.

Other witness include: Gabriele himself; Msgr. Carlo Maria Polvani, Sciarpelletti's superior in the Secretariat of State; and Maj. William Kloter, vice commander of the Swiss Guard.

Sciarpelletti spent one night in a Vatican jail cell and then was released on his own recognizance. If found guilty, he is not expected to be sentenced to jail time, although the charge could carry a penalty of up to one year in prison.

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