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Vatican court finds computer tech guilty of aiding, abetting butler

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — A Vatican court found Claudio Sciarpelletti, a computer expert in the Secretariat of State, guilty of aiding and abetting the papal butler, who was convicted of stealing sensitive Vatican correspondence.

The three-judge panel hearing the case Saturday initially sentenced Sciarpelletti to four months in jail but reduced the sentence to two months, saying Sciarpelletti had never been in trouble with the law and previously had served the Vatican well.

The judges suspended even the two-month sentence and said that if over the next five years he commits no other crimes, the penalty would be lifted.

The Vatican court indicted Sciarpelletti in August, accusing him of helping Paolo Gabriele, the papal butler, by obstructing the Vatican investigation of the butler's role in stealing, photocopying and leaking private Vatican correspondence to an Italian journalist. The butler is serving an 18-month sentence in a cell in the Vatican police barracks.

After an unnamed source told Vatican investigators in late May that Sciarpelletti and Gabriele were in frequent contact, Vatican police searched Sciarpelletti's office in the Secretariat of State. The police said they found an envelope marked "Personal: P. Gabriele."

The court did not reveal details about the envelope's contents other than mentioning assorted emails signed "Nuvola" (cloud in Italian), a small section of a book written by the Italian journalist who received leaked documents from Gabriele and pages of articles downloaded from the Internet.

Sciarpelletti was arrested in late May and held in a Vatican cell for one night, after which he was released on a bail of 1,000 euros (about \$1,270). In its sentence Saturday, the court said it would return the bail to Sciarpelletti, but it also ordered him to pay the court costs, which are about the same amount, said Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman.

The Vatican prosecutor accused Sciarpelletti of obstructing the Gabriele investigation by giving different versions of how he obtained the envelope and by changing his descriptions of his relationship with Gabriele.

The court session Saturday began with the testimony of Sciarpelletti. Giuseppe Dalla Torre, president of the three-judge panel, asked the defendant why he changed his story in the month after his arrest.

Sciarpelletti said his arrest was "traumatic," which, combined with the fact that he received the envelope years ago, made it difficult to remember exactly how he came to have it in his desk. He said he did not know what was in the envelope since he never opened it because it was marked "personal."

The computer tech first told investigators that he received the envelope from Gabriele; then he said he received it from his superior, Msgr. Carlo Maria Polvani, head of the Vatican Secretariat of State's office for information and documentation.

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Saying, "I swear on my baptism and my priesthood," Polvani told the court Saturday that he had never violated the secret of his office and had never improperly removed, copied or shared any confidential Vatican documents. He denied giving Sciarpelletti the envelope.

Polvani, the 47-year-old nephew of Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the nuncio to the United States, said he only met Gabriele when the butler came to visit Sciarpelletti in their office, something Polvani said he thought happened often. "I think they were good friends," he said.

Gabriele, who also testified Saturday, told the court that Sciarpelletti "was a friend and I confided in him," including about "worrying things that were happening in the Vatican." The butler said he gave Sciarpelletti the papers, seeking his opinion about them. But Gabriele said, as far as he remembers, he gave Sciarpelletti the papers on various occasions, so Sciarpelletti must have put the papers in the envelope himself.

Lombardi told reporters that Vatican investigators had not closed their files on the "VatiLeaks" scandal; further investigations and even indictments are possible, he said.

The court session Saturday was not without its lighter moments: the court reporter's computer stopped working at a certain point. Sciarpelletti asked, "Do you need a technician?" and everyone in the courtroom burst out laughing. Gianluca Gauzzi Broccoletti, the Vatican police officer who was testifying, got up and discovered that the electrical outlet being used was no longer working. An extension cord was plugged into a different outlet and the testimony resumed.

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