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Vatican denies scandal report on Vatican bank prelate

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NCR Today

Rome — A Vatican spokesman today called a report "not credible" charging that a cleric hand-picked by Pope Francis to reform the troubled Vatican bank led a double life while serving as a papal diplomat in Uruguay a little more than a decade ago, including having a live-in male companion and visiting gay bars.

The charges appeared in a report published today by veteran Italian journalist Sandro Magister for the magazine *L'Espresso*. They concern Msgr. Battista Ricca, a veteran Vatican diplomat appointed June 15 to serve as the pope's "prelate," or representative, at the Vatican bank.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, issued a statement to journalists calling the report "not credible."

L'Espresso swiftly replied with an acerbic statement "confirming point by point" the details in Magister's story, which it said had been "confirmed by primary sources."

The magazine's statement also claimed the charges in Magister's piece were judged by the Vatican at the time to be sufficiently serious as to warrant Ricca's removal from Uruguay.

On background, a senior Vatican official told *NCR* this morning that "the pope has listened to everyone and has confidence in Ricca."

Ricca, 57, is a veteran Vatican diplomat who served in a variety of posts before returning to Rome and taking over as the director of Vatican residences, including the Casa Santa Marta, where Pope Francis now resides.

The Magister report focuses on Ricca's brief period in Uruguay in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

According to the report, when Ricca arrived, he arranged for a male friend and captain in the Swiss army to live with him in the embassy. The report says the "intimacy" of their relations created a scandal.

Magister also suggests Ricca visited "meeting places" for homosexuals in Montevideo, at one point getting beat up, and that on another occasion he brought a "young man" back to the embassy and ended up getting trapped in an elevator with him overnight.

None of the accusations in Magister's report appear to constitute criminal conduct or sexual abuse, and there is no suggestion Ricca ever faced civil charges in Uruguay.

Magister asserts all this was well known in Uruguay but was deliberately omitted from Ricca's Vatican record, so Francis learned of the charges only after appointing Ricca to his position at the Vatican bank.

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Magister also links the alleged scrubbing of Ricca's file to the purported existence of a "gay lobby" in the Vatican -- a phrase reportedly used by Francis himself in a June 6 private session with leaders in religious life from Latin America.

The *L'Espresso* statement this morning said rather than issuing "improbable and improvident denials," the Vatican should consult its own documentation as well as materials from the civil authorities in Uruguay. The statement also said "numerous bishops, priests, religious and laity" in Uruguay were "direct witnesses" to Ricca's behavior and "are ready to give testimony."

If the charges against Ricca are confirmed, it could be an embarrassment for Francis' reform efforts.

The pope recently created a commission to investigate the Vatican bank,; at more or less the same amount, a former Vatican accountant was arrested by Italian authorities for alleged involvement in a cash-smuggling plot. Francis also accepted the resignations of the bank's two top day-to-day administrators, who currently face a civil probe in Italy for alleged money-laundering.

On background, some Vatican sources this morning suggested the leaks about Ricca's past may be coming from people opposed to reform, describing Ricca as "non-ambitious" and sincerely interested in implementing the pope's vision.

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