

Tremors abound as the Vatican's embezzlement trial begins

A criminal trial opened [in Vatican City court on Tuesday](#) that sees a once-powerful curial cardinal charged with embezzlement, criminal conspiracy and abuse of office.

Joining Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu in the dock are nine other individuals – eight lay persons and one mid-level cleric – on various charges including extortion, fraud, conspiracy, money-laundering and forgery.

By any measure, the business is a really big deal.

Pope Francis [forced Cardinal Becciu to resign](#) as prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in 2020, and the pope also stripped him of the rights and privileges of his cardinal's rank. Francis ordered a major criminal investigation [and changed Vatican City law](#) – the “civil” law that governs Vatican City State – so cardinals would be subject to trial in the City's “regular” criminal courts.

For his part, Cardinal Becciu on Tuesday renewed his protestations of innocence and pronounced himself “serene” before Vatican justice.

He also told his lawyers to prepare lawsuits for slander, to be filed against Msgr. Alberto Perlasca – a key prosecution witness who was once at the center of the London deal – and Immacolata Chaouqui, a former Vatican official and central figure in the second VatiLeaks trial, who has said some very unflattering things about Cardinal Becciu to the press, some of which made it into the prosecutors' paper filings.

“I have always been obedient to the pope,” Cardinal Becciu

told journalists after Tuesday's hearing. "He has entrusted me with many missions in my life. He wanted me to come to trial, and I am coming to the trial."

Besides Cardinal Becciu, Msgr. Mauro Carlini – charged with conspiracy to commit extortion and abuse of office – was the only one present in the courtroom on Tuesday, of the other nine individuals accused. Like Becciu, Carlini maintains his innocence.

Tuesday's hearing was largely procedural. Defense attorneys pressed questions of regularity. They stressed the exceptional nature of the proceedings, the time constraints under which defendants have been made to operate, and the very broad leeway given to prosecutors to define their criminal theories. The next session of the trial is slated to take place on Oct. 5.

The Vatican has touted the prosecution as a sign that Pope Francis' reforms are working, and that a new era of transparency and square dealing is already underway. The facts of the business, however, complicate that narrative.

Several very senior churchmen, including Cardinal Pietro Parolin and Archbishop Edgar Peña Parra – respectively the secretary of state of the Holy See and the *sostituto* of the Secretariat of State (basically the papal chief of staff) – have escaped indictment, though each personally signed off on major steps in the €350 million Sloane Ave., London, real estate development – the spectacular botching of which is at the center of the trial.

The Sloane Ave. business is intricate and complex – almost impossibly so – but here is the short version:

- Unscrupulous dealers, including Cardinal Becciu, conspired to cheat, bilk, extort and otherwise swindle the Vatican out of millions of dollars in fees charged for the "management" of the project.

- They organized both the management of the deal and the ownership stakes in the property so that the Vatican would have to pay more (and more) to get less (and less) out of their capital.

Their efforts succeeded in turning an investment in blue chip London real estate – one the size of the Vatican's annual operating budget – into a loser. Whether criminal or just plain crafty, that takes some doing.

“We consider ourselves to be victims,” Cardinal Parolin told reporters after the indictments came down. Perhaps this is so, but there is no escaping the fact that they knew about the deal and authorized key steps along the way. So did Pope Francis, by the way, who also personally authorized the precipitous raid on offices of both the Secretariat of State and the Vatican's financial intelligence unit – then styled the AIF – which in turn led to sensitive information leaks that compromised financial intelligence cooperation and embarrassed the Holy See.

In fact, the most surprising name on the list of those indicted is that of René Brülhart, the internationally renowned Swiss-born lawyer and financial intelligence expert who implemented root-and-branch reforms and was almost singlehandedly responsible for getting the troubled Vatican operation onto the “whitelists” of financially trustworthy countries.

Brülhart is charged with “abuse of office” but no other crime. This is highly unusual, as the charge is usually one tacked on to ones related to other specific crimes the accused supposedly committed while he was in office. The general consensus is that Brülhart was just about the only one involved in the whole affair who was just doing his job.

There was – is – a Keystone Kops feel to the whole thing, which the Vatican may find tough to shake. Then again, the

Vatican may not want to shake it off just now, in part because letting the whole affair shake out the way it appears to be shaking out is advantageous for the time being, or at least preferable to the alternative: Telling people what really happened, and then really fixing what's really broken.

Sooner or later, the Holy See will have to admit to itself and to the world that it is facing a crisis of earth-shaking proportions. Precisely when the earth will move is impossible to say. It is likewise impossible to predict where things will be when it's all shook out and the dust is settled.

Like the tremors that precede major tectonic disruptions, the ones rippling through the corridors of power in the Vatican these days are only perceptible to experts, and then only when the experts are equipped with the right instruments, rightly calibrated.

Also, the experts need to be in the right place and looking at the right things in just the right time, and even when they are thus equipped and situated, the data they collect can't accurately predict a major seismic event with any kind or degree of accuracy, and may not mean anything at all.

In other words, predicting when the Big One will hit the Vatican power structure is a good bit like predicting an earthquake.

Yet, you can't predict an earthquake. Everyone knows this – it's trite, almost a trope. But here's the thing: That didn't stop Italian prosecutors from putting seismologists on trial for failing to predict the earthquake that devastated L'Aquila in 2009. A court [convicted](#) six figures accused of manslaughter for their failure to do the impossible. Another court [overturned](#) the conviction. The legal rigamarole took [seven years](#) to work its way through the courts. The whole business appalled the worldwide scientific community, while the headlines made official Italy a laughingstock.

With the corruption maxi-trial that opened on Tuesday, the Vatican – where folks think and speak in a peculiar Italian dialect called *curialese* – may well be doing something that is more like Italy's putting the seismologists on trial than anything else.

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