

Cardinal Crimes: Absolute Rule and Fleecing the Holy See

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Like a bank with branches everywhere, the Catholic Church will go after its own when circumstances permit, wherever they are. In other instances, it will take the opposite tack, shielding the detractors or deviants from local scrutiny, and concealing them from the burden of accountability.

Italian **Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu**, former adviser to Pope Francis and the second ranking official in the Vatican's Secretariat of State, could not count on the latter, though his prosecution had a pungent whiff of scapegoating to it. After some two-and-a-half years of tense church drama and institutional intrigue, a Vatican court [sentenced](#) the Pope's former chief of staff to five-and-a-half years in jail for financial crimes, permanent disqualification from holding public office and a fine approximating to \$8000 euros.

In 2020, a displeased Pope Francis accused Becciu of appropriating the equivalent of US\$100,000 in Vatican funds via a non-profit outfit run by the cardinal's brother. This, as things transpired, was merely the beginning. Proceedings against Becciu [commenced](#) in 2021, with the prosecution's brief heaving with charges of embezzlement, abuse of office, conspiracy and witness tampering. The punishment sought was not inconsiderable: a prison term of seven years and three months, a fine of 10,329 euros, and a ban from holding office.

An important focus of the case centred on the development of a London investment property costing the Vatican Secretariat of State an eye-popping total of 350 million euros between 2014 and 2018. A former Harrods warehouse, the property was intended as a site for luxury apartments. Instead, [much fleecing took place](#), with very financially minded

brokers pocketing tens of millions of euros in fees and commissions, topped by a bill of 15 million euros for ceding control of the building.

The property, subsequently sold at considerable loss, was seen as nothing less than a mechanism for fraud. The court [was convinced](#) that the crime of embezzlement had been proven, with the amount coming “to about one-third of the availability at the time of the Secretariat of State because it violated the provisions of the administration of ecclesiastical property.”

Showing himself to be very a much a brotherly sort, Becciu was also found guilty of embezzlement for transferring 125,000 euros to a charity run by his brother Antonio in the cardinal’s home diocese of Sardinia and using Vatican money to pay a Sardinian security consultant (one dare not call her an intelligence analyst), **Cecilia Marogna**.

The number of defendants involved in this enterprise suggest scope, scale and complexity. They [include](#) former Vatican employee **Fabrizio Tirabassi**, convicted of extortion and money-laundering, and **Enrico Crasso**, who earned his crust offering financial advice to the Vatican, found guilty on a number of charges including embezzlement. Both defendants received sentences of seven-and-a-half years and seven years respectively.

This crowded cosmos of heady corruption also [featured](#) the exploits of Raffaele Mincione, an investment manager closely connected to the London investment, and businessman Gianluigi Torzi, the glue in brokering the final stage regarding the purchase of that property. Torzi was found guilty of extortion and sentenced to a six-year prison sentence iced with a six-thousand-euro penalty; Mincione, convicted on embezzlement and money laundering charges, received five years and six months.

Marogna also found herself with a sentence of three years and nine months, with her company receiving a penalty worth 40,000 euros. Her case proved to be a particularly salty one, given [her receipt](#) of 575,000 euros via her Slovenian-based front company from the Vatican’s Swiss bank account, ostensibly to provide Becciu advice on securing the release of **Sister Gloria Celia Narvaez**, who had been kidnapped by al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. But the amount in question was a double payment; Becciu and Marogna had already been furnished a separate amount of 1 million euros to facilitate the release of the Colombian nun using the services of the British security firm Inkerman. (Narvaez was released in October 2021.)

With some extra cash to stroke and burn, Marogna proceeded to, [according](#) to Slovenian bank records linked with her front company Logsic Humanitarne Dejavnosti, purchase luxury goods and enjoy well pampered resort vacations.

Other defendants, albeit of the less colourful variety, also featured. Fines of less than US\$2000 were handed out to **Tommaso Di Ruzza** and **René Brühlhart** for failing to report what amounted to a suspicious transaction, while lawyer **Nicola Squillace** received a slap on the wrist with a suspended one year and ten months sentence.

Throughout these lurid proceedings, lawyers for the defence expressed agitation at what they saw as a lack of due process and a conspicuous absence of respect for human rights on the part of the prosecutors. In one notable example, the prosecutors, defying an order by tribunal president Giuseppe Pignatone, [refused to make available](#) the taped video testimony of their star witness and supergrass Monsignor Alberto Perlasca, the individual whose hands

most dirtied the London real estate investment.

Some of these concerns stand to reason: the long shadow of absolutist power in the form of Pope Francis, whose office fuses executive, legislative and judicial authority, was ever cast throughout. The Holy See, mindful of such power, has also been assiduous in avoiding subscribing to human rights conventions that would provide an avenue of review to the European Court of Human Rights. As Becciu's attorney, Fabio Viglione, [declared](#) in October 2021, "These are harmful to the right of the defence that affect the right to a fair trial."

Marogna's own legal team also noted that the prosecution's refusal to produce court ordered documentation would be intolerable in the formal Italian court system. As a defence memorandum authored by international law specialist Riccardo Sindoca [remarked](#), "In a normal situation, in all countries having a judicial system that could be considered autonomous and impartial and structured in a way to safeguard a fair trial, the refusal would have been immediately sanctioned."

All exercises of calculated scapegoating or selected sacrifice suggest a cleansing of the collective social and political body. The body, duly purified, can ignore the corrupting ailments it was afflicted with. In the past lay disease; now, glorious pink health awaits. But institutions such as the Catholic Church, and any large corporate entity spanning the globe, use such instruments less as matters of purification than distraction. The rot often goes deeper. In the meantime, the ledger of distractions will likely bulk; expect further appeals, a rapidly scribbled film script or a Becciu Netflix special.

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