

Vatican leaks scandal looms large at meeting to elevate new cardinals

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) It isn't anywhere on the official agenda, but as Roman Catholic leaders meet in Rome this weekend, looming in the background will be a recent string of Vatican leaks that reveal a bitter power struggle among the hierarchy.

In recent weeks, several confidential memos and documents by senior Vatican officials have appeared in the Italian media. The leak is "unprecedented in recent history," says Massimo Faggioli, a church historian at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn.

The scandal started in late January when an Italian television program showed letters written to Pope Benedict XVI by Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, the Vatican's U.S. ambassador, asserting widespread corruption and waste in the Vatican procurement process. Vigano, who at the time was secretary general of the office that oversees Vatican City, begged Benedict not to send him to the United States. His removal would cause "disarray and discouragement" in those who shared his anti-corruption struggle, Vigano said.

Later, an Italian newspaper published a series of documents relating to the Vatican bank. The documents showed that a recent push by the Vatican to bring its financial laws in line with international standards had met with internal resistance.

For decades, the Vatican bank has been accused of shady dealings, and its management is currently under investigation by the Italian judiciary for alleged money laundering.

Under Benedict, the Vatican has started internal reforms aimed at including the Holy See in a European list of financially transparent countries. In one of the leaked documents, Cardinal Attilio Nicora, who heads the newly established Vatican financial watchdog, worried that proposed amendments to the laws could be seen as a "step back" from reform.

The Vatican leak that has garnered most international attention involved an alleged conspiracy to kill Benedict "within 12 months." An Italian newspaper published a confidential letter to the pope, describing how an Italian cardinal had spoken about the plot during a visit to China.

The Vatican chief spokesman, Rev. Federico Lombardi, dismissed the claim as "nonsense" but confirmed that the document, as well as others leaked recently, was authentic.

The Vatican has tried to present the leaks as an effort to stymie Benedict's drive to reform the church. "If someone thinks they can discourage the pope and his collaborators," Lombardi said on Vatican Radio on Tuesday (Feb. 14), "they're deluding themselves."

The next day, the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, wrote that Benedict pursues his "innovation and purification" of the church despite "the knowledge that the enemy comes in the night to sow weeds."

But this interpretation isn't shared by all Vatican observers. Andrea Torielli, Vatican analyst at the Italian daily La Stampa, says that the string of document leaks are the consequence of a power struggle inside the Vatican. The real target of the document leaks, says Torielli, is Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state.

According to Torielli, recent reports are being used to "settle the scores" inside the Vatican.

For others, though, identifying the target of the leaks isn't so easy. "It's a tempest in a teapot," says Rev. John Wauck, a professor of communications at the Santa Croce University in Rome.

"The documents' contents are not earth-shattering," Wauck said. "There is an Italian faction interested in evoking changes at the Secretariat of State," but the leaks will not have any effect on future church developments,

according to Wauck.