

# Alleged Vatican money transfers during Pell trial referred to Australian intelligence agency

The Australian financial intelligence agency has handed information to federal police concerning allegations that international money transfers, amounting to hundreds of thousands of euros in Vatican funds, were sent to Australia during the trial of Cardinal George Pell.

During a Senate committee hearing Oct. 20, Nicole Rose, the chief executive of AUSTRAC, the Australian government's financial intelligence service, was asked about allegations, first published in Italian media on Oct. 2, that approximately 700,000 euros in Church funds had been sent to Australia at the behest of Cardinal Angelo Becciu for the purposes of influencing Cardinal Pell's trial on charges of sexual abuse.

Sen. Concetta Fierravanti-Wells asked Rose about media reports of the transfers "allegedly from Vatican funds to a person or persons in Australia."

"Yes, I can confirm AUSTRAC has looked into the matter and we've provided information to the AFP (Australian Federal Police) and to Victoria Police," Rose told the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee.

The exchange during the parliamentary committee session confirmed that AUSTRAC, which is charged with monitoring financial transactions to prevent money laundering, organized crime, tax evasion, fraud and terrorism financing, is aware of the allegations and has apparently identified information meriting police attention or investigation.

Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* first reported Oct. 2 that the alleged transfer is part of a dossier of evidence being compiled by Vatican investigators and prosecutors against Cardinal Becciu, who was forced to resign by Pope Francis on Sept. 24, in apparent connection to multiple financial scandals dating back to his time as *sostituto* at the Vatican's Secretariat of State.

According to the Italian newspaper *Il Messaggero*, the allegations regarding a transfer to Australia were made by Msgr. Albert Perlasca, Becciu's former chief deputy at the secretariat.

Perlasca and Becciu worked together for several years overseeing aspects of curial governance, including the investment Vatican finances. Perlasca is believed to be cooperating with Vatican prosecutors as part of an ongoing investigation into financial misconduct at the Secretariat of State over a period of years.

CNA has not confirmed the substance of the accusation. Cardinal Becciu has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing or attempt to influence the trial of Cardinal Pell.

Pell himself has not publicly addressed the allegations, although the former head of his legal defence team in Australia, Robert Richter, has called for a public inquiry into the allegations.

After initial reports of the allegations, some media outlets speculated that funds could have been sent from Vatican accounts to or through the Holy See's nunciature in Australia.

On Oct. 6 in Rome, Pope Francis met with Archbishop Adolfo Tito Yllana, apostolic nuncio to Australia, reportedly to discuss the allegations. However, AUSTRAC's confirmation that information had been forwarded to both national police and state police in Victoria suggests that any transfer or transfers under investigation could fall outside diplomatic or sovereign channels.

In 2017, Pell took a leave of absence from his role as head of curial finances in the Vatican to return to Australia, where he stood trial on accusations of sexual abuse, attested to at trial by a single alleged victim. After spending more than a year in prison, Pell's conviction was overturned by the Australian High Court earlier this year.

While AUSTAC has forwarded information to police at both the state and federal level, local police in Victoria have been criticized for their handling of the Pell case.

In 2013, Victoria Police opened Operation Tethering, an open-ended investigation into possible crimes by Cardinal Pell. At the time the operation began, no alleged victims had come forward against the cardinal and there had been no criminal complaints made against him. Although they had found no victims or criminal accusations, in 2015 the program was expanded and put on a more formal footing.

In 2017, Pell was charged with sexually abusing two minors. He was convicted in 2018 on the evidence of a single victim-accuser, the second alleged victim died before the trial. The second alleged victim had denied on several occasions that he had ever been sexually abused.

In December, CNA reported that, as early as 2014, senior police officials in Victoria discussed that the investigation into Cardinal Pell could be used to deflect public scrutiny from a corruption scandal in the force, linked to organized crime, which had become a media firestorm in Victoria.

Cardinal Pell served as the first prefect for the Secretariat of the Economy in the Vatican, a department created by Pope Francis in 2014 to bring coherence and transparency to the administration of curial finances.

From 2011-2018, Cardinal Becciu served as sostituto at the Secretariate of State. While there, he was known to have a strained relationship with Cardinal Pell.

CNA has reported that the two cardinals clashed repeatedly over Pell's attempts to reform Vatican finances and to institute reforms ordered by Pope Francis.

Following the allegations that Becciu used Vatican funds in an attempt to interfere in Pell's trial in Australia, on Oct. 17 Becciu's lawyer, Fabio Viglione, said, "regarding the everlasting attention of some journalists to Cardinal Pell's trial," Becciu "is compelled to reiterate vigorously that he has never interfered with it in any way whatsoever."

The lawyer also said "to protect and defend his honour, so gravely damaged," Becciu may seek legal recourse against some news organizations for their continued reporting of "an alleged, albeit non-existent activity to taint the evidence of Cardinal Pell's trial."