

# PELL, VICE AND THE VATICAN

The cardinal battles sinister foes as the Pope's money tsar

PAOLA TOTARO

LONDON



Cardinal George Pell shared his suspicions that up to €100m in unregistered cash owned by the Vatican could be hidden in foreign bank accounts at a secret meeting with Australian bankers in London's financial district in 2016 — but four years later his questions remain unanswered.

In a new book citing confidential letters, documents and transcripts of private conversations between cardinals, Italian investigative journalist Gian Luigi Nuzzi recounts in detail the campaign of intimidation and psychological warfare unleashed by the Vatican's old guard against attempts by Pope Francis and his German predecessor Benedict XVI to clean up the finances of the Holy See.

The intimidation included a Watergate-style break-in and the theft of a dossier of documents relating to the 1982 murder of the Vatican banker Roberto Calvi just weeks after Pell's appointment as financial tsar. This was interpreted internally as a Mafia-style warning to busybody outsiders.

Nuzzi's 835-page tome, *The Vatican's Black Book*, documents more than 50 years of financial skulduggery by sections of the Roman curia to avoid proper scrutiny and accounting for the millions in cash donated by Catholics around the world each year.

The author, who was a recipient of the original Vatileaks scoop, charts the earliest attempts by Pope Benedict to reform the Holy See's financial affairs through to the ousting in September of the Vatican kingpin Cardinal Angelo Becciu.

In a vast section titled *Attacco Agli Uomini del Papa* (Attack on the Pope's Men), Nuzzi writes about the work undertaken by Pell and Libero Milone, the Vatican's first auditor-general.

The Dutch-born former partner of multinational accounting giant Deloitte was later accused of spying, threatened with arrest by the Vatican's Swiss Guard and abruptly dismissed by the now disgraced Becciu. All charges against Milone were later dropped without explanation and the book reveals that he is suing for damages to his reputation.

According to the new account, Pell flew to London in October 2016 and on his return to Rome called an urgent meeting with two of his most trusted advisers, Milone and Danny Casey, his former business manager of the Sydney Archdiocese. "The Ringer (Pell's nickname in the Vatican) came right to the point, no preambles:



St Peter's Square in Vatican City, scene of intrigue; below, Pope Francis with Cardinal George Pell in Rome last month

AP, AFP

"I've been in the City (London's financial district) and I met with some friends, Australian bankers. They confirmed to me that there are important funds belonging to the Vatican which are still hidden in Switzerland. We need to find them and who controls them," Nuzzi writes.

"The information provided was credible but imprecise although one account cited allegedly contained €200m ... although potentially a total of up to €7bn may be contained in the Lugano branches of two private banks."

Nuzzi reports that Pell and Milone quickly requested papal permission to prepare a rogatory letter demanding formal legal access to documentation related to the funds. Pope Francis approved the request and a legal firm was immediately briefed to undertake the necessary paperwork in Switzerland. However, months passed and by Easter 2017, despite continuous requests, no documents were forthcoming.

As the days and weeks passed, Nuzzi writes, the Pell team began to fear that there had been an internal leak or security breach and that its legal move had been discovered and the transfer of documents stopped. "At the same time, Milone had made a written request to Apsa (the Vatican's real estate arm) flagging that he planned visit offices which he had identified were black holes in ac-



countability and did not properly document where rent money collected was held," Nuzzi writes.

"Neither of these lines of inquiry by Pell or Milone have ever been concluded because both men were ousted from their positions ... this is the 'B' side of the story, one that could have led directly into the Swiss vaults which would hold a literal treasure in dollars, euros and Swiss francs which are clearly owned by the Vatican but remain outside the orthodox flows of internal accounting and traditional international financial circuits and procedure."

Nuzzi is by no means a Pell apologist and describes Pope

**The thieves cracked several safes and stole less than €500 but also targeted one cabinet and took away a dossier of documents, part of a confidential archive**

Francis's decision to appoint the cardinal as his finance tsar as flawed, particularly as he had full knowledge of the cloud of child sex abuse allegations against him at the time.

The book also spares no detail about the accusations made against Pell, from the earliest claims of cover-up of child abuse in Ballarat to the findings of the child sex abuse royal commission, his conviction of sex crimes against two choir boys and the High Court's subsequent quashing of the verdict.

However, Nuzzi concludes unequivocally that Pell and Milone — who was hired on the basis that he work independently and report directly to the Pope, not to Pell — were targeted by nefarious forces even before they had properly commenced their work.

This included the professional break-in at the office of the Commission for Reference on the Organisation of the Economic Ad-

ministrative Structure, the body established by Pope Francis the year before to conduct a full examination of the Vatican's finances and propose reforms.

The theft happened on March 30, 2014, just weeks after Pell was appointed to his role. The thieves cracked several safes and stole less than €500 but also targeted one armoured cabinet among many dozens and took away a dossier of documents, part of a confidential archive held by COSEA. Scrutiny of CCTV cameras at ground level and the vast network of corridors beneath the palazzi showed nothing. No doors or gates were forced open and investigators ultimately concluded that the safe break-in and money theft was a set-up and the documents were the real target.

"This was not a random act. The thieves stole a part of the secret archive of the secret Pontifical Commission of COSEA. It's a theft without precedent, an extremely grave action that could compromise the commission's work," Nuzzi says.

"The thieves knew exactly what they were looking for but why did they target those papers? The conclusion they came to internally was that this was a threat, a criminal signal — and not even a veiled one — to those who were working for change. Between the lines, the thieves were saying 'We know where your archive is. We

can get to it whenever we want. We know everything and everything is possible'."

Nuzzi writes that the COSEA commissioners were deeply perturbed by the crime and that it ratcheted up the psychological pressure, layering it on top of the institutional pressure they were already experiencing.

"From that day, they felt vulnerable, observed, spied on. The theory that this was an intimidatory act was also accepted at the most senior levels when the news was relayed to the Pope and to Pell who had only been in his new post a couple of weeks."

The climate of threats and fear-mongering was exacerbated a few days later when Pell's private secretary, Melbourne lawyer Father Mark Withoos, was warned that his boss might be being followed. He raised the claim with security as required and also with Pell, who counselled "caution" and told him they needed "nerves of steel" and that a "psychological war" was under way that aimed to frighten and disorient them.

"He was told these were actions designed to distract those who were loyal to the Pope from the very real problems they were about to confront."

However, the mystery would deepen further when an envelope was found in the pigeonholes used for mail distribution in the Vatican Prefecture. It was found on the

morning of April 26, on the eve of a mass for the canonisation of John Paul II when thousands of pilgrims were expected to converge on St Peter's Square and security in the Vatican should have been at its most stringent.

Inside, Vatican security found part of the dossier of papers stolen from the COSEA secret archive, most of them missives between key figures in the 1970 Vatican Bank scandal that resulted in the death of banker Calvi.

"In particular, the thieves seemed to have wanted to return confidential correspondence, dating back to 1970, between senior Vatican officials and the P2 Masonic fixer, Umberto Ortolani and the banker, Michele Sindona, including several letters from the latter to the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the time ... these are names that are the cause of serious embarrassment to the Holy See."

Sindona was the man linked to the most powerful and dangerous Cosa Nostra bosses active in the US in the 1960s, including Don Vito Genovese and John Gambino. The Sicilian fixer, along with Monsignor Paul Casimir Marcinkus and Calvi, had been a protagonist in one of the most troubled periods in the Vatican's financial history. Calvi was found hanged under mysterious circumstances under London's Blackfriars Bridge on June 18, 1982, while Sindona was found dead in prison on

March 20, 1986 after drinking coffee laced with cyanide only a few days after being sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of lawyer Giorgio Ambrosoli, the liquidator of one of its banks. While investigators believed for many years that both cases had been suicides, Calvi was found to have been murdered six years after his death, although the accused were ultimately acquitted.

Nuzzi writes that within the Vatican, senior figures counselled against alarmism but queried and debated how this act should be viewed: "What message is contained in the return of these documents. Talking to friends (Maltese economist and Vatican auditor) Joseph Zahra describes it as an act of war while Pell tried to send messages of reassurance and to show that he has not been thrown by events."

Indeed, in an interview some weeks later published in the Italian press, Pell — certainly in retrospect — appeared to offer a veiled reference to the theft, saying it was time to say "enough to scandals ... I am proceeding with perseverance. Nunc coepi (now I begin). We are moving ahead and we must improve but one thing is certain: we've had enough of Calvi and Sindona, enough with surprise news delivered in newspapers. We need transparency in finance, professionalism and modernity in methods. And honesty."

## Let's join push for all Aussies to come home

The Morrison government can, and should, be doing much more to help those stuck overseas

CAROLINE OVERINGTON

ASSOCIATE EDITOR



Vivek Dafre has a daughter, Alisha, who is 13 months old. Like most new dads, he is smitten. She walks! She talks! She's on solid foods!

But this he knows only because he has been watching her on Zoom. Vivek hasn't actually seen his little girl in the flesh since she was five months old.

Now, I don't want anyone to worry. This story ends well. And that's why it's worth telling because we as a nation really should be striving to create more stories just like it.

Vivek's young family — wife Gauri Rajan Pophale, and their baby girl — were caught in India during the pandemic and yes, OK, you want to switch off now because you think you've heard it all

before. Thousands of Australians are stuck overseas, and they are finding it so hard to get back, but maybe they should have tried harder to get home earlier, or something?

Putting that aside for a moment, Indian-Australians are doing it particularly hard. According to figures released by DFAT last week, there are more Australians in India wanting to come home than there are in any other country. Most have been there, get this, since March.

Why? Because there are very few flights leaving India. There are very few places in quarantine. The process is a bit corrupt, favouring people with connections, or else the wealthy, over ordinary Australian citizens, who just want to come home.

The bulk are bearing it as well as anyone might in such circumstances, but this has been a tough couple of weeks — with many having to watch as the revered Indian cricket team sailed right into Aus-

tralia. And yes, they get it. They're not as important as Virat Kohli. But the tweets under #stranded-AussiesInIndia suddenly became more desperate.

"Please help us, we are dying to see our families." "Each day is getting more difficult ... understand what we are going through."

"We stuck in India from last October. Please please please help us to come back home."

To be clear: these people are Australian citizens, and they are caught abroad — and honestly, there has not been much of an effort by anyone in government, with the exception of Senator Kristina Kenneally — no coincidence, she is herself an immigrant — to bring them home.

Why? It's not racism, exactly, it's nothing as toxic or malign as that, but does it seem to you that there is some low-level hostility in Australia towards people who have deep and loving connections to the places from whence they came?

Vivek and his wife are perhaps typical. They are part of the enormous wave of skilled migration from India that began a little over five years ago.

Indian-Australians still comprise a small group — just 2.9 per cent of the population — but India



Gauri Rajan Pophale and daughter Alisha were stranded for eight months

has been Australia's biggest source of migrants since 2016, and it was the top source of Australian citizens last year.

They are expected to outnumber Chinese-born Australians by 2030. They are highly educated, and highly skilled; they are very often in full-time employment. They take up citizenship; they speak the language; they want children.

Vivek and Gauri arrived in Australia under the skilled mi-



Gauri was on maternity leave, and decided to stay in India with her parents and the in-laws for a few months so they could get to know their grandchild.

Then came the pandemic. The lockdown in India prevented Gauri and her daughter from leaving the state in which her parents live, to travel to an airport. In any case, there were no flights.

An Australian-born private citizen called Simon Quinn, 32, who now lives in India, helped organise some charter flights out of India off his own bat earlier in the year. He did so after logging into a chat room for expats and finding Australians distraught about how to get home.

The Australian government had not, at that time, organised any charter flights to get its citizens out of India (the US, UK, Germany, France, Ireland and Canada did so). The federal government would later organise 13 flights with Qatar Airways and Qantas. Since then, the government has relied on a series of Air India and Qantas flights.

Priority is given to "vulnerable people" but it's not entirely clear what it takes to get on the "vulnerable" list.

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tickets, which sell out in minutes. There are reports of Indian travel agents buying seats and trying to sell them to a profit.

Some Indian Australians believe the flights are full of people who have "connections", meaning political connections, or connections with the airline staff. By the time the "seats" appear online, they're pretty much gone.

Vivek formed an online support group, and he says it overflows with anguish. "People saying, I have been paying rent on my apartment in Sydney for five months, I can't afford to keep paying rent on a place I don't live in, and I don't know when I'll get back, and all my stuff is in there, my important documents, everything."

Or else: "I had to give up my job. They couldn't keep it open for so long."

Or else: "My car is sitting in the driveway since April."

Now, I mentioned that this story had a happy ending and it does: when a happy flight became available this week, he bombarded the High Commissioner — that's now Barry O'Farrell, who is a very good man — and Air India, and got a ticket.

Mum and bub are now in quarantine, meaning Vivek still hasn't been able to hug them, but gee he's getting close.

So, that's great, but there is more that we could do.

The role of a democratic government is well understood: to try to create conditions under which individuals might strive towards goals that bring them some satisfaction. One of the ways in which people find satisfaction is to be with, and take care of, the people they love.

The Morrison government has responded superbly to the pandemic in many respects: JobKeeper was genius; and so was the mechanism by which Australians could withdraw their super.

The government has performed rather less well on borders. It's odd, because there are some simple solutions to the problem of having 37,000 Australians stuck abroad. Lift the cap on arrivals; allow for shorter quarantine stays to free up rooms and personnel; allow those with appropriate housing to quarantine at home; bring in apps and tracking devices.

There's an argument that Australians need to be able to travel around. They are the great wanderers, with faces open to the world. Generally they do good. But they also need to be with those they love, here and abroad. It puts a spring in their step and that, in turn, puts good in the world.

Just think of Vivek, holding Alisha. You're smiling, right? We need more of that.