

Italian scandal prompts Vatican to condemn 'defamation' campaign

VATICAN CITY – A small but annoyingly persistent scandal over trumped-up accusations against a Catholic editor in Italy has underlined how much attention the Vatican pays to Italian affairs.

On Feb. 9, the Vatican issued a statement deploring what it described as a “campaign of defamation against the Holy See” – a campaign, it said, aimed in part at Pope Benedict XVI.

The statement was designed to put to rest an incident that has played out like a soap opera in Italy for several months. But in fact, it only seemed to elevate the dispute to a higher level. Italian papers ran front-page stories with headlines like: “An open wound” and “The Vatican rejects the poison.”

The “poison” in this case was the insinuation that the character assassination against Dino Boffo, the former editor of the Catholic paper *Avvenire*, was an inside job instigated by the Vatican and not the church’s political critics.

Boiled down to its essentials, the narrative of this rather extraordinary tale runs like this:

Under Boffo, *Avvenire* last year stepped up criticism of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi for his increasingly public womanizing and alleged involvement with prostitutes.

Il Giornale, a paper owned by Berlusconi’s family, published a front-page attack on Boffo, calling him a hypocrite and claiming that court records showed he had harassed a woman after having a homosexual relationship with the woman’s husband.

Despite Vatican support, Boffo resigned, saying he and his family could no longer put up with the “war of words” that had been unleashed.

In December, the editor of *Il Giornale*, Vittorio Feltri, issued a public apology, saying he had learned the accusations against Boffo were false. But in January, Feltri claimed that the original documentation against Boffo had been given to him by “a very authoritative source in the Holy See.”

That began a frenzy of speculation. Italian media theorized that Feltri’s source may have been the editor of the Vatican newspaper or even Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state, who was supposedly engaged in a turf battle with the Italian bishops’ conference, which owns *Avvenire*.

The latest Vatican statement, issued by the Secretariat of State, said the insinuations against Cardinal Bertone and the editor of *L’Osservatore Romano*, Giovanni Maria Vian, were baseless. It expressed amazement that what it called “incredible hypotheses” had been circulated so consistently in Italian media.

In addition to the exceptionally strong language, the statement was unusual in underlining Pope Benedict’s direct interest in the case.

“The Holy Father Benedict XVI, who has been kept continually informed, deplores these unjust and injurious attacks, renews his complete trust in his collaborators, and prays that those who really have the church’s interests at heart may work with every possible means so that truth and justice prevail,” it said.

The decision to involve the German pope in what was essentially an Italian political and media dispute prompted different reactions inside the Roman Curia. Several Italians said it was a necessary move and perhaps should have been done earlier; some non-Italians were puzzled that the Vatican had to take such a high-profile step.