

Vatican financial document took complex route to delivery

VATICAN CITY – The unusual and somewhat mysterious gestation process of Vatican documents came into the spotlight recently, thanks to a controversial white paper on economic justice.

In essence, critics of the document – which called for a global authority to curb the excesses of financial markets – speculated that its authors had done an “end run” to avoid the pre-publication scrutiny of top Vatican officials.

That turned out not to be true, but the episode illustrated that the editing and approval procedures at the Vatican are less than transparent and far from uniform.

The 41-page text on reforming the international financial system was prepared by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Among other things, it proposed a “central world bank” to regulate the flow of monetary exchanges, and taxation on financial transactions to aid the economies of poorer countries.

Critics immediately tried to downplay the importance of the document and argued that the justice and peace council was a minor player at the Vatican. Then in mid-November, an Italian blogger reported that the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, had been blindsided by the text and had ordered that, from now on, all such documents must have the prior approval of his office.

The real back story was far different, according to informed sources. Months ago, in view of the upcoming G-20 meeting in France Nov. 3-4, Vatican officials discussed how to make a contribution to the discussion on international monetary reform.

Three years earlier, the Vatican had been invited to a U.N.-sponsored International Conference on Financing for Development in Qatar, and the Vatican delegation had published a position paper on financial abuses. That paper was prepared by the justice and peace council, but it was presented as an official statement of the Holy See.

This year, however, because the Vatican is not a member of the G-20 and had not been invited to its meeting, Vatican officials decided that a statement on financial reform should come in the form of a “note” by the justice and peace council, rather than a formal statement of the Holy See.

The important thing was that the council’s members and consultants worked with the Secretariat of State throughout the drafting process. The “Second Section” of the Secretariat of State, which deals with foreign affairs, not only discussed the document’s approach but reviewed and “adjusted” its content before publication, sources said.

So the idea that Cardinal Peter Turkson’s justice and peace council had pulled a fast one on Vatican higher-ups was baseless. But the story got legs because of a misunderstanding that occurred about the same time.

Every year, Pope Benedict XVI – like his predecessor – issues a message for the World Day for Migrants and Refugees. The message is prepared by the pontifical council that deals with migration issues, and receives final approval by the Secretariat of State.

This year, however, extensive excerpts of the pope’s migration message were inadvertently published five days early on the website of the Vatican Information Service. The text was removed after several hours, but there was enough embarrassment to prompt action by Cardinal Bertone. He issued instructions that all documents bearing the pope’s signature must be released through the Secretariat of State, and not circulated ahead of time by other Vatican agencies.

That led some to mistakenly conclude that Cardinal Bertone was reacting to the document on financial reform, and reining in radical Roman Curia elements at the justice and peace council. On the contrary, Vatican sources said, no document on sensitive global economic issues would ever be published without the “nulla osta” of the Secretariat of State.

Vatican documents come in many varieties, and are often subject to unexplained delays and detours. Many texts are reviewed and modified by various Vatican offices, in particular the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Sometimes the

review process can take years.

Even documents on presumably “safe” topics are subject to careful scrutiny. For example, the Congregation for Catholic Education was set to publish new guidelines for promoting vocations to the priesthood at a conference held in early November. But the document has yet to appear, because it is still being reviewed by the Secretariat of State.

What accelerated publication of the economic reform document was a deadline – the G-20 meeting – and a sense that the global crisis required a more urgent and detailed response from the church.