

Vatican spokesman 'astonished' Croatia repossessed church property

VATICAN CITY - A tract of disputed church property in Croatia was returned to the Croatian government after a justice minister annulled a series of past property decisions that had given the property to a diocese.

The justice minister's action has caused "great astonishment," the Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, told journalists Aug. 11.

The center of the dispute is a monastery located in Dajla, Croatia, along the Adriatic coast.

The monastery was built by the Benedictine monks of Praglia, Italy, who were given the property in the mid-1800s by a nobleman.

The property, which included vineyards and an olive grove, was used by the church until the then-communist government of Yugoslavia nationalized all church property in 1948 and turned the Dajla monastery into a home for the aged.

The Italian news agency ANSA reported that the Benedictines received compensation in the 1980s after Yugoslavia signed an agreement with Italy to pay Italians whose property was confiscated after World War II.

Croatia became independent in 1991 and signed another agreement with the Vatican to return church property or provide compensation for it, giving the former monastery to the Diocese of Porec and Pula.

However, as the original owners of the monastery, the Italian Benedictine monks asked the diocese for the equivalent of \$42.5 million for the property, ANSA said. Although the diocese sold off much of the land around the monastery to a developer planning a golf course, Pope Benedict XVI appointed a commission of cardinals to mediate the dispute.

The papal commission decided that the property had to be returned to the Benedictines and that the diocese had to provide for “only partial compensation,” according to an Aug. 2 Vatican press release.

ANSA reported the cost was set at \$8.5 million.

However, the agreement has been jeopardized now that Croatia’s minister of justice confirmed Aug. 11 that the Dajla property was to be returned to the Croatian government.

Justice Minister Drazen Bosnjakovic annulled a series of 1990s property rights decisions that gave the property to the Diocese of Porec and Pula, reported CroatianTimes.com.

The justice minister said the property should never have been given to the diocese, because the Benedictines of Praglia had been the original owners, the Croatian news site said.

Father Lombardi said the latest government intervention was surprising because of “the extraordinary nature of the decision adopted, because the Croatian prime minister had shown her intention of facing - in a spirit of collaboration - a problem both Croatia and the Holy See hold dear and also because such a way of proceeding does not seem consistent with the fundamental principle of the certainty of law.”

The problem continues to be an internal church affair, he said, while expressing hopes the interested parties would go through the proper channels to seek an explanation for the latest developments.