

ITALY

Suspicious funds and dubious priests plague Bishop Viganò's hermitage

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Is the refuge for priests victims of the pontifical hunt against "backwardists" witches, or the embryo of a new schismatic church? This is the question that arises spontaneously observing the vicissitudes of the Eremo di Sant'Antonio alla Palanzana, a former

Capuchin monastery near Viterbo, in central Italy. It is currently the property of the Vittorio and Tommasina Alfieri Association, but has become the base of the activity of the Exsurge Domine association, sponsored by Monsignor Carlo Maria Viganò.

From the presentation of Exsurge Domine one should deduce that the right answer is the first. Indeed, Monsignor Viganò puts at the top of his objectives "the assistance, support and material aid" of priests, religious and consecrated laity who want to maintain the Catholic Tradition and follow sound doctrine, and who are therefore marginalised or persecuted because of this pontificate. In reality, the events of these last few months suggest instead that the right answer is the latter, not only and not so much because of the episcopal 're-consecration' affair we spoke about in a [recent article](#).

In fact, the activity of Exsurge Domine was officially announced last May at the same time as the launching of a fund-raising campaign for the first project: a "monastic village" to provide a roof for twenty or so Benedictine nuns destined to evacuate their monastery in Pienza because of a dispute with the archbishop of Siena, Cardinal Augusto Paolo Lojudice. The case of the nuns of Pienza attracted attention because it had been given considerable prominence in the news and Monsignor Viganò had intervened in their defence.

But, from the start, the launch of the project "Monastic Village", began with a peculiarity: it speaks of "renovation and adaptation work on a farmhouse and other pre-existing buildings", which are detailed with plans and costs; but it does not say where this farmhouse is or who the individuals are that make up the association (of which Monsignor Viganò would only be the patron), called upon to manage the 1.5 million euro that is the goal of the fundraising. All that is known of Exsurge Domine is the name of its president, Count Giuseppe Vannicelli Casoni, who has a very long personal relationship with Monsignor Viganò. As for the location, the only indication speaks of 'a benefactor with suitable real estate'.

Why so much secrecy? Perhaps because revealing the mysterious 'benefactor' and the location of the property would have immediately raised some perplexity and unwelcome questions. The pre-existing farmhouse is in fact none other than the Hermitage of Palanzana, in the hills near Viterbo; and the Vittorio and Tommasina Alfieri Association that owns it has been controlled for some fifteen years by the priests of the 'Familia Christi' Congregation, dissolved by the Holy See in December 2019 after a year of commissariation. The three remaining ex-Familia Christi priests (plus a fourth illicitly ordained by Monsignor Viganò) currently do not hold management positions - as their

leader Fr Riccardo Petroni tells the Daily Compass - but they remain the true soul of the association and also the inhabitants of the hermitage.

It was only in December 2023, that **Monsignor Viganò revealed the location** of the monastic village, and because he was forced to do so by revelations in an **anonymous open letter** published by some Italian and American blogs. At the same time, however, he presented a change of plan: the nuns of Pienza had decided to decline the offer and the hermitage structure is now destined to become the headquarters of the Collegium Traditionis, "a house of clerical formation that will welcome young traditional vocations and accompany them with discernment towards the priesthood".

In fact, the strong suspicion is that this was the plan all along, with the nuns of Pienza acting as a decoy to raise the necessary funds. A suspicion that the nuns themselves must have had: sources very close to them in fact report to the Daily Compass that the problems between the nuns on the one hand and Monsignor Viganò and Father Riccardo Petroni on the other, date back to the beginning of the summer, because the nuns - to whom only a building detached from the main body of the building, a minor part of the entire property, was destined - were unable to obtain any guarantee on their future and accommodation. They are refused any form of contractual guarantee or a loan for use, and the nuns also complain about the lack of transparency in the collection of funds and even the order of the work. In fact, they let the Daily Compass know that the work begun during the summer 'did not concern the wing intended for us', a circumstance denied by Don Petroni. The fact is that at the end of October there was a definitive rupture, which Exsurge Domine only **communicated on 22 November**, prompted, in the meantime, by the news leaking out on the Internet.

The point is that for several months Exsurge Domine had been collecting contributions from Catholics from all over the world in the name of the nuns of Pienza, when, the renovation project concerned the entire property managed by the former Familia Christi priests. Moreover, none of the money collected (the amount remains unknown) has been paid to the nuns who, contrary to Monsignor Viganò's claims, are still desperately searching for a structure that can house them.

The perplexity does not only concern the economic issue, but also the credibility of Exsurge Domine's own objectives: while rescuing persecuted religious and consecrated men and women within the Church is laudable, it is questionable whether the former Familia Christi can be included in this category, just as it is doubtful whether they are the right subjects to provide adequate formation based on the Church's true Tradition. However much they pose as victims of the 'official' Church because of their

love for Tradition, direct testimonies collected by the Daily Compass allow us to state with certainty that the reasons for their dissolution have very little to do with Tradition. Instead, it had to do with issues of lifestyle, formation, liturgy, church discipline, statutes and more. And the objections did not come primarily from the "Bergoglian" enemies, but from the "friends" of the now-dissolved Ecclesia Dei Commission charged with monitoring religious institutes linked to celebrations in the ancient rite.

Not only: since the priests of Palanzana are without incardination because they have refused to divide themselves into different dioceses, they cannot lawfully celebrate Mass or administer the sacraments. But it appears to the Daily Compass that they do, both in the hermitage and in other communities; a circumstance that - when asked - Fr Petroni did not wish to deny.

What is therefore emerging at the hermitage of Palanzana, under the wing of Monsignor Viganò, is a reality that is not simply critical of the ecclesiastical authority but in fact does not recognise it and claims to represent the 'true' Church as an alternative to the 'official' one; even if this is not said officially, maintaining an ambiguity that serves to attract a greater number of faithful confused by the current situation in the Church.