

SEXUAL ABUSE

Final sentence and 'flight to Rome', the Zanchetta scandal persists

ECCLESIA

11_02_2025



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The Zanchetta mystery lingers on. At the start of the month, the Bishop Emeritus of Orán was back in the news, after his sentence was confirmed by the Court of Appeal of Salta: four years and six months imprisonment for the persistent sexual abuse of two

seminarians, aggravated by the fact that it was perpetrated by a clergyman. Judges Virginia Solórzano and Pablo Arancibia rejected Zanchetta's lawyers appeal against the 2022 sentence handed down by the Court of First Instance in Orán.

The Court of Appeals confirmed the testimonies of the victims, considering them "an incriminating element of great value, since their accounts are consistent and provide details of the situations in which they found themselves". This was an important recognition for the two young men who, in addition to the trauma of abuse, had to cope with a toxic climate over the years that led to them losing their vocations. One of them, an orphan, very poor and with one sick parent, expressed his anger at the attitude of the Church authorities, especially Monsignor Luis Antonio Scozzina, the successor of the bishop condemned in Orán. "I have always thought, and probably they taught us, that bishops are the successors of the apostles, and therefore they must continue the prophetic proclamation and not be the successors of Pilate in washing their hands," one of the victims complained to his friends on line.

The former seminarian has a clear idea of why it was so difficult for Scozzina to "cut off" Zanchetta completely, despite the testimonies against him and the direction the trial was taking: "The Church has so many rules, laws, regulations, canonical rights and rubrics for its faithful. But when you have a friend who is dressed in white, they are all omitted," the young man said. There is no point in denying it: the elephant in the room in Zanchetta's case is his friendship with the Pope.

One of the main junctures in this affair took place in December 2017 with the appointment of the Argentine prelate, five months after his mysterious resignation from the leadership of the Diocese of Orán, as an assessor at the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See (APAS) . A post invented for him ad hoc and without any power, as the Holy See itself admitted ("a post that in no way foresees responsibilities of the government of the Dicastery", the Press Office later justified itself).

In January 2019, shortly after the first revelations made by the journalist Silvia Noviaskey, who in '*El Tribuno*' followed the case more than anyone else, the Vatican Press Office claimed that at the time of his appointment to the APAS, the accusations of authoritarianism were known, but not those of sexual abuse. A version that lost credibility a month later due to a document published by Noviaskey and dated 22 April 2016, in which two vicars general, the rector of the seminary and two other monsignors, at the request of the then apostolic nuncio in Argentina, Monsignor Emil Paul Tscherrig (later transferred to the USA and made cardinal), formally denounced Zanchetta's peculiar behaviour towards seminarians (preference for the more attractive ones,

requests for massages, access to their rooms) and referred to an initial internal report in September 2015, following the accidental discovery of photographs of Zanchetta naked and masturbating by the diocesan chancellor, Luis Diaz. The vicar general then filed a new complaint in 2017, this time alleging actual sexual abuse.

The *Daily Compass* understands that at the time of the call to the Vatican, the Pope also privately expressed his conviction of the innocence of his Argentinean friend, believing the version given to him that photographs had been doctored to get him into trouble, which was publicly invoked in an interview with *Televisa*. At the same time, however, Francis himself would not have had confidence in his managerial abilities, given the economic allegations that had cast a shadow over his experience in Orán and prevented him from taking part in any decision-making. Hence the choice of a post that, as the Holy See wished to clarify, did not involve "governmental responsibilities". It is a fact that the period during which Zanchetta held the post in the Curia coincided with the development of the investigation against him in Argentina, not without tensions with the Argentine judiciary, which complained about the difficulty of contacting the accused.

In September 2021, the formal farewell to the APAS post and a few months later the sentence of four years and six months, and now confirmed by the Court of Appeal. After being sentenced, Zanchetta was sent to prison, where he remained for four months before being placed under house arrest for health reasons, first in a private clinic and then in a convent. His transfer to the Nuestra Señora del Valle convent, located in the same diocese where the events that led to his conviction took place, provoked protests from the faithful, who appealed to Bishop Scozzina and complained that they were unheeded.

Zanchetta's illness has not only prevented him from remaining in prison, but is also at the centre of another mysterious chapter in this affair. Last November, the *Daily Compass* was from Argentina that the convicted bishop had asked for and received permission from the Court of Appeal to leave the country to go to Rome for medical treatment, presumably surgery. A source close to Argentine judicial circles told us that Zanchetta had been granted permission to undergo surgery, probably at the Gemelli Policlinico, the Pope's hospital. The prelate remains registered with the FAS, the Vatican's health fund.

It has not been disclosed what illness the prelate has that would require an operation outside Argentina, but in the past his release from prison and transfer to a private clinic had been possible due to problems with hypertension. According to sources of the *New Compass* Zanchetta had asked the Argentine judiciary to send him to

Gemelli to treat the heart problems he is said to be suffering from. But if between 2017 and 2020 it was easy to meet the bishop in the small state, especially in the Santa Marta residence where he lived, his return to Rome seems to have taken place under the banner of maximum secrecy. Nothing is known about his possible admission to the Gemelli hospital, where he was previously treated until 2021. Sources close to the Argentine judiciary have informed us that the judges expect him to return this week. The confirmation of the sentence would therefore have taken place while the Bishop was in Italy, thanks to the permission of the same Court of Appeal that confirmed his conviction.

Meanwhile, many of Orán's faithful remain on the warpath, especially faced with the prospect of Zanchetta returning to serve his sentence in a convent in his former diocese, in the same premises where a Sardinian missionary who signed a letter against the then bishop's behaviour once lived.