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Cardinals attend a Chrism Mass celebrated by Pope Francis inside St. Peter's Basilica, at the Vatican, Thursday, April 1, 2021. (AP Photo/pool/Andrew Medichini)

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Pope Francis celebrated a surprise Holy Thursday Mass with the cardinal he fired last year, extending an extraordinary gesture to Cardinal Angelo Becciu by celebrating the liturgy that commemorates Jesus' Last Supper with his apostles before his crucifixion.

News of the celebration in Becciu's private chapel was confirmed by Becciu's private secretary. In addition, a longtime friend who was in contact with Becciu after the papal visit said the cardinal was "very happy" with the meeting. A Vatican official said he couldn't confirm Francis' private initiative but added that "such a gesture of paternity doesn't seem strange on a day like today, Holy Thursday."

The visit carried enormous symbolic weight and could suggest Francis may have come to realize he had erred in his handling of the Becciu dossier. Francis has long prized the Holy Thursday service as a ritual of repentance and service.

Francis forced Becciu's resignation on Sept. 24 apparently acting on allegations, contained in a yet-to-be-published article in the Italian newsmagazine *L'Espresso*, that Becciu had sent 100,000 euros in Holy See funds to a diocesan charity controlled by his brother.

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Becciu admitted he sent the funds to the charity — not his brother — and told reporters he had done nothing wrong. The money never left the diocese's bank account.

Becciu at the time was the No. 2 in the Vatican secretariat of state, and enjoyed full authority to manage the department's substantial asset portfolio, including using it for charitable donations.

Becciu has filed a 10 million-euro defamation lawsuit against *L'Espresso*, claiming its report, and months of other damaging articles citing unnamed Vatican prosecutors, ruined his reputation and eliminated his chances of becoming pope.

Francis was able to celebrate the service with Becciu after he cancelled his participation in the Vatican's official Holy Thursday Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, delegating it instead to the dean of the College of Cardinals.

The Vatican never explained why Francis was skipping the official service. Francis has traditionally traveled to a prison or refugee center for the Holy Thursday service, which usually involves a foot-washing ritual to symbolize Jesus' willingness to serve others.

Since Becciu's ouster, the conduct of the Vatican's criminal prosecutors investigating a host of allegedly corrupt financial deals have come under increasing criticism. They have suffered a string of defeats in foreign courts ruling that their searches were illegitimate, their arrest warrants unenforceable and their requests for asset seizures "appallingly" full of misrepresentations and omissions.