

ONE MORE THING

IS THE VATICAN REALLY NECESSARY?

The Catholic Church is changing rapidly in its self-understanding. As we saw in our discussion about the Second Vatican Council, it has abandoned the imagery of earthly kingship, the Pope has sold his triple crown and given the money to the poor, and the language it chooses for self-expression is about a humble pilgrim travelling through history, a Church typified by “a poor man telling a poor man’s story”, as someone once called St Francis of Assisi. When we have established “Christ’s fundamental option for the poor”, then the Church will once more shine out as the Christian reality it should be. Did this thought ever reach the Vatican, one asks? Oddly enough, *it emanated from the Vatican*.

The world would rather think about Mother Teresa in the gutters of India, sharing the poverty of the poorest, than of the less recognizable sanctity of a busy archbishop or a businessman who is also a Catholic. And it is widely assumed that the Vatican is an example of hypocrisy *in excelsis*, the ultimate in self-deception. What is the world’s leading Christian doing living in the biggest palace in Rome, with marble pavements, gilded ceilings, thrones, and the most stupendous collection of priceless art fencing him in on every side? How does the servant of the servants of God come to be guarded by a private army, ferried about in limousines and helicopters, greeted with the honours accorded to the monarchs of the earth, etc., etc?

One has to say that the present Pope has been accorded that other homage offered to the great: he has suffered an attempted assassination. It would appear that the guard, Swiss or merely bullet-proof, is all too appropriate. But how about the palace, the all-but-fictional sovereign state, the foreign secretaries at airports, and so on? Could there be a different way?

The Legacy of the Past It’s hard to judge what we have inherited, even as individuals living in a family, a nation, a culture. The Church is among the oldest of human cultures, and its heritage, or patrimony, is accordingly complex. The spiritual patrimony is immense: a history which has involved the highest but also the lowest of human experience, the presiding zeniths of spiritual revelation, the dregs of the cup of iniquity humanity has had to swallow. The lives of the saints, known or unknown, the sufferings of the lowly and of the great, the prayers of all the ages make up a quite imponderable freight, whose extent is only known to God. In some sense the Church, and particularly the bishops, are charged to guide and preserve all of this cargo through time.

The Vatican is a kind of physical symbol of such accumulation and conservation. The church of St Peter is built over a Roman graveyard of the first century, containing a burial-site which is shown as the resting-place of the earthly remains of a Galilean fisherman who was first lieutenant of the Son of God. Fidelity to the legacy of Peter and the apostles is the touchstone of the Church’s Christian claims. In this sense the Church requires a form of obedience to the past. *Keeping the faith* is a good phrase. The accumulation of the things of the Roman Empire mark a time of history where the Roman world went into flux and ultimately collapse; the titles “Pater Patriae” and “Pontifex Maximus” (*Father of the Fatherland, High Priest of Rome*) were simply scooped up by the Bishops of Rome as they fell from the grasp of the last Emperors. For centuries the Bishops of Rome governed and preserved the surviving remnant of what Rome had been. The massive obelisk in Piazza San Pietro, for instance, passed to Caesar from Pharaoh when Egypt was conscripted as the granary of Rome. It now upholds a Cross, to display the victory of Christ over Amon-Ra. The story of the unearthing and erection of this

monument, in the presence of a pope who was also an Italian prince, is a piece of Renaissance history. The whole story is part of history that can hardly be unwritten. It is a tiny fraction of the story of the Vatican itself, where every stone of the edifices seems to be charged with memory. The enduring presence of the reigning Pope gives this history a live realism.

The Buildings The Vatican itself, as a set of buildings, could, of course, be abandoned. It would require a massive endowment to secure its preservation, and could become another vast museum full of Japanese cameras flashing away from morning till night. The Pope could be established in some other site - a monastery of some kind, renowned for what the Council asked modern churches to be given : *a noble simplicity*. The Pope, who has traditionally lived a simple, austere life in a suite of offices on the top floor facing the Piazza, could be seen to live a simple austere life in a flat; and the thousands of friars, sisters, and prelates who do the day-to-day work of the Vatican could be accommodated in similarly understated buildings. "How many people work here?" a bemused visitor asked John XXIII. "*About half,*" replied the Pontiff.

The Vatican State The sovereign state has enabled the Popes in modern times to claim political neutrality; it has also allowed that strange anomaly, the Papal Diplomatic Service. The Vatican currently sustains diplomatic relations with nearly a hundred States, including many of the most important: China being the glaring exception. Where a Papal Nuncio exists, he is traditionally Doyen of the diplomatic corps in that country. The Pope thus enjoys a quite extraordinarily privileged closeness to seats of power, and uses it (usually with renowned finesse). No Pope would wish to surrender that unique, and sophisticated, mechanism for the doing of good, without some overwhelmingly superior alternative.

Money The financial affairs of the Vatican have given cause for scandal and for edification in roughly equal degrees. For some recent years, the budget has been in clear deficit, as Papal visits have proceeded to lay waste to the reserves. At the moment the Vatican appears to be solvent. The vast holdings in stocks and shares which are said to underpin the place are hard to evaluate. The artistic patrimony is irrelevant, as places like St Peter's and the Vatican Library can hardly be classed as possessions. It would be as impossible to sell the Pietà of Michelangelo as it would be to fix a price for it; there is nowhere else for it to go or to belong, and there is no-one who deserves to own it; The Dome of St Peter's is not a possession, but a liability (requiring huge quantities of stocks and shares for its upkeep). The charitable involvement of the Vatican is immense, and the Diplomatic Corps is extremely expensive (although the Nuncio in London inhabits a modest house on Wimbledon Common - vastly inferior to the residences of most other Ambassadors). The publication of accounts is a welcome innovation, and shows that the annual collection (Peter's Pence) is still a major source of the Vatican's income each year.

Unique Treasure, or Historical Incubus? The judgment about the Vatican is thus a hard one. Does fidelity to Jesus demand that all that ghastly Renaissance power-architecture be consigned to the past in a great act of cleansing? Or is it a sign of keeping faith that the Pope should stay close to Peter's grave, and try to re-interpret the historical baggage that has accumulated? Does the humility and simplicity of the Pope contradict the grandeur of his surroundings in a way that fascinates the world? Is a Papal Audience an occasion of sin, a blatant use of papal celebrity, or a licit encounter between the Vicar of Christ and the faithful?