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The Vatican: Secrets and Treasures of the Holy City

Michael Collins

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Written by a Vatican insider and accomplished church historian, this book is a unique behind-the-scenes look at the world's smallest nation and the spiritual center of the Catholic Church. Produced with the full cooperation of the Vatican, this is a beautifully illustrated insiders guide into the 2,000 year long history of the Vatican and papal influence, daily life and governance of the world's largest religious body, and the art collections and other priceless treasures rarely seen by the public. In addition to a unique photographic tour, the book includes personal interviews with various Vatican employees and insiders who make their home there, from a Swiss Guard to a singer in the Sistine Chapel choir. This book is an unparalleled look into life inside the Holy City.

A Conversation with Father Michael Collins, Author of *The Vatican*

You are a former Vatican guide. How did you first become directly involved in the Eternal City?

When I was 18, I began to spend my summers as a guide in St. Peter's Basilica. For the next six years I spent three months each summer accompanying tourists and pilgrims from all over the world around the Basilica. It was a wonderful experience and I enjoyed meeting people from all sorts of religious and cultural backgrounds.

Can you briefly speak to what daily life is like in the Vatican? How many people permanently reside there; is there a constant parade of pageantry; etc.?

There is an anecdote about Pope John XXIII. On one occasion an ambassador asked him how many people worked at the Vatican. He paused and thought for a few moments before answering "I think about half of them!"

The number of people residing at any one time in the Vatican fluctuates. There are roughly 400 people. These of course include the Pope but also Swiss Guards, security personnel, medical staff, clergy and religious brothers and sisters. Although many people are fascinated by the pageantry when there is a big religious ceremony, behind-the-scenes life is quite ordinary. I tried in this book to give a balance between the formally glitzy side and the ordinary day-to-day life of the citizens.

You spent six summers as a guide in St. Peter's Basilica. What do you find most interesting about being a church historian?

I love the stories that are more amazing than fiction. The popes have had an extraordinary effect on history. They launched the Crusades, the Inquisition and in a certain sense the Reformation. At least one pope was mad and had the body of his predecessor disinterred and thrown in the River Tiber. Pope Alexander divided the New World between the Spanish and the Portuguese in the early 16th century. That is why Brazilians speak Portuguese and the rest of Latin Americans speak Spanish. Another Pope tried to stop Galileo's amazing discovery of the earth revolving around the sun. Throughout The Vatican, I have shaped a brief bird's eye view of the popes and their influences on history.

The Vatican Museums house one of the greatest art collections in the world. Why is it important for the city to hold onto these pieces, instead of say, to sell the works and give the profits to those in need?

Many people say that the Vatican should sell off the treasures. There is a lot to be said for that idea. The problem is why disperse the unique collection which is available to people who come to Rome? The collection, which is several hundreds of years old, would be bought by private individuals and other museums. It would not be so easily available to the thousands which can visit the museums each day. Also, most of the artifacts are buildings and architectural sites which cannot be sold for practical reasons.

The Church is a spiritual family and proudly safeguards its family heirlooms like any family treasures items passed down lovingly from one generation to the next. The artists believed in the spirituality which inspired their works so that is why we revere and care for them. They don't go up for auction as soon as the artist dies.

It is worth remembering also that the Catholic Church is one of the foremost charitable agencies in the world which looks after the poor and sick as well as offering education to millions.

In your opinion, what is the most interesting or unique position of employment held within the city limits?

A difficult question. I suppose it really has to be that of the Pope. He is an extraordinary combination of a man of prayer, a politician, a teacher, a leader and an ordinary human being. The popes have varied in quality. Some have been pretty bad while some have been saints. I have great regard for Pope Benedict, who has proved himself to be a lot less controversial than Pope John Paul and has earned the affection and respect of many, Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Does the pope ever get a vacation? What is the atmosphere like during the holiday seasons?

There is a saying only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun. During July and August, most Romans, and consequently Vatican employees, clear out of sizzling Rome for the hills or the sea. Even the Pope withdraws to his country residence for two months outside Rome although he continues work as normal. He receives important visitors and carries on his schedule as he does at the Vatican. Christmas and Easter are the most important holidays and thousands flock to St. Peter's to receive the pope's blessing Urbi et Orbi—to the City and the World.

The city holds 2,000 years of history under its veil. What is an important piece of the story that is rarely mentioned or remembered?

Most people who walk into St. Peter's do not realize that they are crossing over an underground cemetery. There is a patch of fresco dating from about the second century with a Greek inscription Petros eni--Peter is here. This is close by the presumed tomb of St. Peter. In 1939, workmen preparing a tomb of Pope Pius XI found the entrance to the tomb. They found most of a man's skeleton. Beside it was also the skeleton of a mouse which must have got into the tomb at some time and been unable to get out. It evidently died there.

The architecture in the Vatican is second to none. Is there a certain building that holds special meaning for you?

My favorite is also the most famous, the Sistine Chapel, built at the end of the 15th century. It has wonderful frescos by early Renaissance painters, Perugino, Peruzzi, Ghirlandaio and Michelangelo. Just think, it is exactly 500 years ago this year since Michelangelo painted the marvelous ceiling. I love to go in there in the late evening when all the visitors have left for their homes or hotels and just spend literally hours looking at the frescos. They are so majestic and awe- inspiring.

What is your personal relationship with the city today? As a Dubliner, do you spent much time visiting

Italy?

I am very lucky. I spent seven years both studying and teaching in Rome. That was a great experience. Rome is only two and a half hours away by plane so it is not far. I have a lot of friends there and I love to visit. I also am often asked to accompany tours, which gives me another opportunity to return.

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