
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE VATICAN

Winston Churchill once described the Soviet Union as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." Add to that an anachronism within an anomaly, and we have the Vatican in a nutshell.

To comprehend its legal status is to embark on a "title search" through 2,000 years of jurisprudence and diplomacy. The city-state—the last classical *polis*—has few citizens, yet the word *foreigner* finds no place in its official vocabulary. No person is unwelcome, no passport must be shown to gain entry.

"Jurists find gaps, ambiguities, and even apparent contradictions in the structure of this miniature precision clock," writes one of the contributors to **The Vatican and Christian Rome** (Westfield, N.J.: Eastview, 1979), "while the ordinary person only notices a slight tendency of minor cogs to lose time."

Not everything is up to date in Vatican City, as this handsomely illustrated volume lovingly makes plain. In 43 chapters—topics range from the Secret Vatican Archives to the Vatican Museums—written by eminent clerics, art historians, and journalists, the book surveys the city-state's history and organization.

The volume does have one real flaw: Bearing the Vatican's own *imprimatur*, it is, not surprisingly, short on analysis and self-criticism. A good antidote is Peter Nichols's **The Politics of the Vatican** (Praeger, 1968).

Nichols, a British journalist long based in Rome, provides memorable sketches of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI. When John (born Angelo

Roncalli) worried at night about his immense responsibilities, Nichols writes, he used to comfort himself with the thought: "But who governs the Church? You, or the Holy Spirit? Very well then, go to sleep Angelo."

Any gaps in the chronicle of the Holy See as an institution can be filled in from **The Papacy** (Kenosha, Wis.: Prow/Franciscan Marytown, 1981), a handsomely illustrated volume edited by Christopher Hollis.

The Vatican is not a glass house, and monitoring its financial maneuverings requires dogged legwork. Corrado Pallenberg's **The Vatican Finances** (Humanities, 1971) is a thorough but dated history of papal wealth from the age of Constantine through Pope Paul VI's curial reform.

Pallenberg notes that in 1964, when Vatican diplomat Agostino Casaroli hammered out an agreement with communist Hungary providing for restoration of the church hierarchy, Casaroli brought back to Rome in addition a Hungarian order for urinals to be manufactured by Ceramica Pozzi, a Vatican-controlled company.

The Finances of the Church (Seabury, 1978, cloth & paper), edited by William Bassett and Peter Huizing, is more solid, more recent, more searching, and less fun. As they review the Vatican's financial picture, department by department, function by function, the authors emphasize key trends in the Holy See's economic strategy during the 1970s.

The Vatican, they write, has faced the ethical dilemmas of its investment policy, selling off its interest in

companies producing armaments and even birth-control pills. Ventures deemed "inappropriate" include construction of vacation resorts and luxury apartment houses and hotels. (The Holy See once owned a 15 percent interest in Generale Immobiliare, builder of Washington's Watergate complex.

The Holy See, Peter Nichols makes plain in **The Pope's Divisions** (Holt, 1981), has rarely been aloof from "world affairs." But in foreign policy, the Vatican customarily "thinks in centuries," a habit of mind formed by long experience. There was, for example, a direct link between the crowning of Charlemagne by the pope on Christmas Day, 800, and the veto by the Austro-Hungarian Emperor of Cardinal Rampolla's election to the papacy in 1903. In his overview of the Vatican as a temporal actor, Nichols keeps one eye on long-term trends and the Holy See's "grand design," the other on short-term tactics and controversies.

The most successful papal gambit of recent years — the "opening" to Communist Europe—is chronicled in **Eastern Politics of the Vatican 1917-1979** (Ohio Univ., 1981, cloth & paper) by Hansjakob Stehle. Stehle ranges from the present back to the first diplomatic overtures to Bolshevik Russia by Achille Ratti (later Pope Pius XI) and Eugenio Pacelli (later Pius XII). He highlights the Holy See's vacillation between principle and opportunism as it sought a *modus vivendi* with communism. As a practitioner of *realpolitik*, for good or ill, the Vatican has come a long

way from its rigidly principled antipathy toward the reunification of Italy in 1870. The story of that diplomatic disaster is told by S. William Halperin in **Italy and the Vatican at War** (Univ. of Chicago, 1939; Greenwood reprint, 1968).

The Holy See's aims, powers, and style evolve not only from century to century but also from reign to reign. Peter Hebblethwaite describes the process in **The Year of Three Popes** (Collins, 1979). As a "window" onto the papacy, Hebblethwaite chooses the events of 1978: the death of aging Paul VI, who presided over the Second Vatican Council; the election of Albino Luciano as Pope John Paul I, and then his sudden death 33 days later; and the surprise selection of Karol Wojtyla, a Pole, as the new pontiff, John Paul II.

In the actions of these three men, Hebblethwaite finds evidence of a gradual shift from an "imperial papacy" to a more collegial "Petrine ministry." That conclusion is echoed by Patrick Granfield in **The Papacy in Transition** (Doubleday, 1980).

Whatever the situation a century hence, it is a good bet that the Vatican will still be annually publishing its compact **Annuario Pontificio** (International Publishers), a staff directory of the Holy See, complete with addresses, phone numbers, and capsule biographies. Among its 2,000 pages is a section giving the official Latin name of every diocese and archdiocese on earth. Those who perceive the Vatican as obstinate and inflexible should note that Saigon is now called *Hochiminhpolitan*.