

## TOP FIVE VATICAN MYTHS

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I want to thank you for your gracious welcome. Let me begin by telling you a little bit more about what I do.

I am what the Italians call a *Vaticanista*, meaning that my full-time journalistic assignment is covering the Vatican, in the same way that other reporters might cover the White House or the United Nations. My job is to ferret out whatever I can about the papacy and the Holy See, and then to express my findings in language that makes sense to the average English-speaker, and especially the average American. Based on four years of doing this work day in and day out, I can assure you, it's not easy. The Vatican and the United States inhabit different cultural worlds, so that lifting an idea from one world and phrasing it so it expresses the same meaning in the other is an exercise in translation that sometimes strains the limits of language. To put the point in a rather flip, but not wholly inaccurate, fashion, quite often America is from Mars, the Vatican from Venus.

Tonight, I want to try to lift some of this intellectual fog by walking you through my list of "Top Five Myths" about the Vatican. I'll illustrate how these myths, recycled endlessly in movies, novels, and lazy journalism, distort our perceptions. I'll give a specific example in the form of public discussion of the American sex abuse crisis. Collectively, these myths have the capacity, in effect, to drown out the voice of Peter in U.S. culture.

I want to say at the outset that I do not wish this presentation to come across as either an apologia for the Vatican, or an attack upon it. My role is as an observer, not a partisan, in ecclesiastical debates. I am aware, as all of you are, that the Catholic Church faces serious challenges. A priest shortage raises questions about the Church's capacity, especially in Europe and North America, to offer the sacraments. In Latin America, missionary efforts by aggressive evangelical sects threatens to erode the Catholic identity of some parts of the continent. In Africa, Christian populations face strong threats from militant Islam. These are facts, whatever one makes of particular remedies that might be proposed. Discussion is urgently needed, and the last thing I want to do is choke it off in the name of a faux harmony. I also make no pretense of having solutions to these problems. My ambition is far more modest, of helping to foster more productive debate by offering what I hope is an informed, reasonably non-ideological analysis of Vatican policy and psychology. I agree with philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre that in modernity public conversation too often takes the form of "the self-assertive shrillness of protest" rather than patient, sympathetic dialogue. If nothing else, perhaps by debunking these myths our collective blood pressure can be lowered, so that conversation between Rome and America can generate more light and less heat. (I am conscious, by the way, that speaking of "Rome" and "America" as univocal realities is a wild over-generalization, but that's a point I don't have time to develop).

### **Myth #1: Single-Mindedness**

When the Holy Father travels, he does so in a dual capacity as both a head of state and the head of the Roman Catholic Church. When he arrives in a foreign country,

therefore, he is usually greeted twice – once by the president or prime minister, again by the local bishops or perhaps the papal ambassador, the nuncio, on behalf of local Catholics. This second greeting is usually a short and sweet affair: “Holy Father, may your trip be filled with a thousand blessings,” that sort of thing. On a recent foray into Eastern Europe, however, the greeting was delivered by the nuncio, a kindly old Italian *monsignore*, who has a well deserved reputation as a windbag. He has that marvelous Italian rhetorical capacity to go on and on, seemingly without ever saying anything. This day he was in rare form. I clocked his greeting of the pope at 40 minutes – and bear in mind, this was a 24-hour visit. Some of us actually thought the trip would conclude before the greeting did. In any event, I was in the press pool for this event, and I ended up seated next to the papal entourage, meaning the cardinals and other Vatican officials who travel with the pope. I was next to a senior Vatican cardinal who was obviously becoming agitated. His veins were bulging on the forehead, his eyes were rolling in the back of his head, and it seemed he was going to burst. I leaned over and asked, “What do you think?” There was a moment’s calculation, but it was obvious the cardinal needed to vent. So, leaning over in a *sottovoce* fashion, looking up at this old Italian monsignore who just wouldn’t shut up, the cardinal said: “You realize that some Italian village is missing its idiot.”

In addition to being a once-in-a-career punch line, this story makes an important point. Pundits, activists and journalists often write sentences such as “The Vatican thinks,” “The Vatican wants,” “The Vatican is afraid that ...” In a literal sense these formulae are meaningless. There is no creature called “the Vatican” out there with a unified will and intellect. Only seen from afar can the Vatican seem a Stepford Wives-kind of

environment, in which everyone looks alike, dresses alike, thinks alike and acts alike. The personnel of the Roman Curia are united by the doctrine of the Church and by the ministry of the successor of Peter. But there are many different ways to express those convictions, and hence there are different dreams and contrasting visions. This is not an organism but a bureaucracy, and it is rarely of one mind.

If you want a clear example, consider the relationship between the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the Vatican's office for liturgical policy, and the Office of Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff, which organizes the Pope's own liturgies. The congregation, especially under its most recent prefects, has steered the church toward a generally more somber, traditional, reverential liturgical style. The Pope's own liturgist, Archbishop Piero Marini, does not share this outlook, and continues to produce papal ceremonies that have a more modern, expressive, and culturally diverse look and feel. One practical example is liturgical dance. It is discouraged by the congregation in most instances, yet it is an ordinary feature of papal celebrations, often in elaborately choreographed numbers that call to mind Broadway productions. I remember being on a papal trip and watching one of these numbers. I called a friend in the congregation on my cell phone, who thundered: "Marini must go!"

Obviously, John Paul thinks of this as a dialectic rather than a contradiction.

I could multiply such examples. The point, I trust, is clear: the Vatican is full of smart, strong-willed people, who have different ideas. Whatever the issue, and whatever your perspective, I can almost certainly name individuals in the Holy See who agree with you. I say this without denying that there is a unique culture and worldview in the Holy See which personnel tend to assimilate, and that the range of opinion on some issues is

more narrow than in the wider Catholic world. Still, the point is that there is a surprising degree of diversity within this culture. Hence it is pointless to demonize the institution. It would be more charitable, as well as more politically productive, to identify those figures sympathetic to your concerns and to seek conversation with them.

### **Myth #2: Absolute Control**

One day the lion walks up to the monkey and demands: “Monkey, who’s in charge of this jungle?” The monkey, quivering, responds: “You are, Mr. Lion.” The Lion responds, “That’s right, and don’t you forget it.” He then approaches the warthog: “Who’s in charge of this jungle?” The warthog immediately replies, “You are, Mr. Lion.” Same response: “That’s right, and don’t forget it.” He then sees the serpent, and says, “Who’s in charge of this jungle?” The serpent hisses, “You are, Mr. Lion.” Finally the lion spots a 100-year-old bull elephant, and walks up to him demanding: “Elephant, who’s in charge of this jungle?” The elephant picks up the lion with his trunk, spins him in the air, and brings him crashing back down on his head. He then lumbers away. The lion gets up, dusts himself off, and says: “Hey, just because you don’t know the answer is no reason to get an attitude.”

The lion, you see, operated out of a myth of absolute control.

Many people, including many Catholics, assume that the Pope is the ecclesiastical equivalent of our lion, wielding absolute control over every aspect of church life. The implied image seems to be that he sits behind a computer terminal deep inside the Apostolic Palace, making all the decisions for the Catholic Church. However entertaining it is to think such thoughts, reality is a good deal more prosaic.

First of all, no one, not even the Pope, has “absolute control” in the sense of pulling all the strings in the universal church. No one in the Vatican determines how much St. Ann’s parish in Boise spends on paper clips. Second, there is no person or group of persons, again including the Pope, who has “absolute control” even inside the Vatican. The Holy See has a president/prime minister structure, in which supreme political authority is vested in the president but day-to-day administration is left to the prime minister. In the Holy See, that role is played by the Secretary of State, currently Cardinal Angelo Sodano. Further, the various offices in the Vatican operate fairly independently. The result is that, quite literally, much of the time Peter does not know what Paul is doing.

To take one example, in February 2002 Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, was days away from a trip to Moscow to meet with the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Alexy II. Just as Kasper was to depart, the Secretariat of State announced an upgrade of four apostolic administrations in Russia to full dioceses, a move sure to inflame Orthodox concerns about Catholic expansionism. The Orthodox rescinded Kasper’s invitation, feeling betrayed because Kasper had not warned them. He did not do so because he didn’t know himself. Secretariat of State had failed to give advance notice, so Kasper read about it in the papers like everyone else. This was not the result of a plot to sandbag the meeting with Alexy. It was simply a breakdown in a system that often does not foster good inter-departmental communication.

Bottom line: there is no secret cabal of insiders or Opus Dei members who make the decisions in the Vatican; that is the stuff of potboiler novels. I understand this

speculation, given the Holy Father's age and impairments. Inevitably, this means that more documents, nominations and policy decisions are shaped by others. But two points need to be made. First, John Paul II remains capable of intervening when he wants, and I see no evidence that Vatican officials are acting against his wishes. (No more than is normal in any bureaucratic system). Second, these "others" are not anonymous Svengalis, but heads of the relevant curial agencies, cardinal-members of the various dicasteries, or the Pope's trusted advisors. Far from being a conspiratorial junta, they sometimes are not terribly coordinated among themselves, a point thrown into clear relief by the recent debacle over what the pope did, or did not, say about the movie "The Passion." The moral of the story is that it's better to focus on the content of decisions, which is real, rather than conspiracy theories about the process behind them, which are likely to veer into fantasy.

### **Myth #3: Secrecy**

Four psychiatrists are at a convention, and after a long day they find themselves in a bar. One complains, "People are always coming to us with their problems, but we don't have anybody to talk to." His colleague says, "Why don't we share with each other right now?" They all agree, so the first psychiatrist begins. "My problem is that I have romantic relationships with my patients." The next says, "My problem is that I use my medical license to prescribe drugs and then I sell them." The third says, "My problem is that I overbill my clients." Finally, it's the last psychiatrist's turn. "My problem," he says, "is that try as I might, I just can't keep a secret."

That, I would venture to say, is true of many people in any bureaucratic system, including the Vatican. Often they just aren't very good at keeping secrets. You know what they say about Rome: it's a city in which everything is a mystery and nothing is a secret.

Let's unpack the mythology. Does the Vatican have secrets? Yes, as every government, corporation, NGO, and other institution do. Moreover, for those things it really wants to keep under wraps – such as the files of theologians, or correspondence from bishops – the Vatican is more insulated from pressures for disclosure than secular democracies. There are no sunshine laws that compel the Vatican to release case files, no civil judges who can order the institution to turn over records. After the Swiss Guard murders of 1998, for example, the Vatican judiciary conducted its own investigation, the results of which have never been released even to the families of those who died.

Two points, however, should be made about this secrecy.

First, despite the differences between the Vatican and democratic agencies noted above, in my experience the Vatican is no more successful at keeping secrets than any other bureaucracy. Sooner or later, most things leak out. Second, the real problem with understanding the Vatican is not that it's secretive, but that it's unique. Its culture is foreign to the experience of most observers. To understand the Vatican, one must master three “languages”: Italian, which is the working language of the papal bureaucracy; the specialized language of the Catholic Church, meaning a knowledge of church history, scripture, theology, liturgy and canon law; and the distinct argot of the Roman Curia itself, meaning its systems, culture and psychology. Hence what looks from the outside like secrecy is often really singularity.

Let me be clear: As a professional communicator, I wish the Holy See did a better job of opening itself up. John Paul II in 1984 said the church should be a “house of glass,” and we’re not there yet. At the same time, for the most part there is no cover-up, no dark forces orchestrating events behind the scenes. Most of the time, what you see is what you get ... if you have eyes to see and ears to hear.

#### **Myth #4: Wealth**

The Vatican is gripped by a severe financial crisis when Colonel Sanders calls the pope, offering him \$25 million to change the words of the Lord’s Prayer from “give us this day our daily bread” to “give us this day our daily fried chicken.” The Holy Father thanks Colonel Sanders for his offer but says that it’s out of the question. A couple weeks go by, and the financial crisis worsens. Again Colonel Sanders calls, and this time he offers \$50 million to change the words from “give us this day our daily bread” to “give us this day our daily fried chicken.” Once again the Holy Father thanks Colonel Sanders for his generous proposal, but says there’s simply nothing he can do. Finally, the crisis becomes truly desperate and the Vatican is on the brink of bankruptcy. Colonel Sanders calls with a final offer: \$100 million to change the words to change the words from “give us this day our daily bread” to “give us this day our daily fried chicken.” The Holy Father says, “Let me get back to you.” He then calls together the cardinals and says, “Gentlemen, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that our financial crisis is solved: Kentucky Fried Chicken is giving \$100 million to the Vatican.” The cardinals are ecstatic. Then one thinks to ask: “Holiness, what is the bad news?” The pope responds, “The bad news is that we have lost the Wonder Bread contract.”

Consider the rather cynical implied assumption in this old joke: At the Vatican, everything is for sale. It coheres well with popular mythology. In the public's imagination, the Vatican is awash in priceless art, hidden Nazi gold, plundered treasures from around the world, and vast assets tucked away from prying eyes in the Vatican Bank. Reality is far more prosaic. To put it bluntly, the Vatican is not rich. It has an annual operating budget of \$260 million, which would not place it on any Top 500 list of major social institutions. To draw a comparison in the non-profit sector, Harvard University has an annual operating budget of a little over \$1.3 billion, which means it could run the equivalent of five Vaticans every year and still have pocket change left over. The Holy See's budget would qualify it as a mid-sized American Catholic college. It's bigger than Loyola-Marymount in Los Angeles (annual budget of \$150 million) or Saint Louis University (\$174 million), but substantially less than the University of Notre Dame (\$500 million).

The total patrimony of the Holy See, meaning its property holdings (including some 30 buildings and 1,700 apartments in Rome), its investments, its stock portfolios and capital funds, and whatever it has stried up in a piggy bank for a rainy day, comes to roughly \$770 million. This is substantial, but once again one has to apply a sense of scale. What the Holy See calls "patrimony" is roughly what American universities mean by an "endowment" – in other words, funds and other assets designed to support the institution if operating funds fall short. The University of Notre Dame has an endowment of \$3.5 billion, meaning a total 4.5 times as great as the Vatican's.

But what of the some 18,000 artistic treasures in the Holy See, such as the *Pietà*, that don't show up on these ledgers? From the Holy See's point of view, these artworks

are part of the artistic heritage of the world, and may never be sold or borrowed against. Michelangelo's famous *Pieta* statue, the Sistine Chapel, or Raphael's famous frescoes in the Apostolic Palace are thus listed at a value of 1 Euro each. In fact, those treasures amount to a net drain on the Holy See's budget, because millions of Euros have to be allocated every year for maintenance and restoration.

The moral of the story is that the image of the Vatican as a playground for "masters of the universe" just isn't reality. This is, for the most part, not an island of exaggerated privilege, but a normal bureaucratic environment in which the church's civil servants are ordinary men and women trying to do their jobs as best they can.

#### **Myth #5: Careerism**

Personnel in the Roman Curia are often damned if they do, and damned if they don't. If they are patient and take their time, they're lazy; if they show initiative and drive, they're ambitious. As far as the first horn of that dilemma is concerned, I'm sure everyone has heard the famous remark attributed to Pope John XXIII. When asked how many people work in the Vatican, Pope John is alleged to have responded, "About half." I wonder how many people know the companion quip. The story goes that someone once asked the Pope if it's true that his people don't work in the afternoon. "No, that's not true," Good Pope John supposedly replied. "My people don't work in the morning. In the afternoon, they don't even come in."

To call careerism a myth is not to deny that it possesses elements of truth. Ask anyone in the Vatican, and they'll tell you stories that will make you toes curl. Yet the idea that every Vatican decision or document is crafted to advance or retard someone's

career is a case of mythology by degree ... in other words, pushing a legitimate insight too far. In fact, the Holy See is probably no more a hotbed of careerism than most other hierarchical organizations.

There are two senses in which a cleric might be careerist. The first is the worldly sense, meaning a desire for material rewards or fame. Certainly the Vatican is no place to get rich. Jobs that are the equivalent of senior vice-presidents in the corporate world, or cabinet ministers in the public sector, carry salaries of less than \$20,000, and officials usually pay their own rent and personal travel. The Vatican is also no place to get famous. Documents and initiatives are cloaked in anonymity, because they want the public to hear the institution's voice when the Vatican speaks. Thus the more "careerist" a priest is in the worldly sense, the less likely he is to want to be in the Vatican. The other kind of careerism is the ecclesiastical sort, meaning the ambition of becoming a bishop. There certainly are such people knocking around Rome, but acquisition of the mitre and pectoral cross is by no means a slam-dunk. During John Paul's 25-year papacy, only about 50 percent of the Americans who have served in the curia have gone on to a bishop's job. As one rather impish curial veteran told me, one of the virtues the Vatican teaches is the capacity to take pleasure in promotions ... of others!

Finally, it's worth noting that many people who work in the Holy See never asked for their job, and in some cases after many years of service they have only the foggiest idea of how they got there. Some curial officials put in their five years and then go home, grateful for the experience but equally glad to be done with it. The moral of the story is that it is fair to criticize Vatican documents and decisions, but that criticism will better reflect reality if it's premised on content, rather than assumptions about craven motives.

## Conclusion

Let me take a specific case in point to illustrate how these myths can cloud perceptions of Vatican activity and intentions. As most of you recall, the United States bishops met in Dallas in June 2002 to craft policy on sexual abuse in response to the crisis that erupted in Boston. The heart of this policy was the “one strike” rule, meaning that after one substantiated allegation of sexual abuse, a priest will be removed from ministry for life. The bishops envisioned that this removal would be accomplished through their administrative authority rather than through a penal procedure under the *Code of Canon Law*, which many of them saw as cumbersome, expensive, and open to reversal in Rome. In order to invest these new rules, or “norms,” with the force of church law, they went to the Vatican for approval.

It’s no secret there was ambivalence in the Holy See. In fact, on the very day of the Dallas vote, I published a story outlining these reservations. The next morning, Tim Russert asked Bishop Wilton Gregory on “Meet the Press” to respond to a Vatican official quoted in my story to the effect that “the Church has to be about more than driving out the pedophiles.” The ensuing conversation involved complex matters of canon law, and many people struggled to get their minds around the issues. At the heart of the matter from the Vatican’s point of view was the right of an accused party, in this case the priest, to due process.

Under the impact of deadlines and the opaque nature of the canonical issues involved, most journalists and commentators fell back on instinctive patterns of framing the story derived from the myths we’ve been discussing. Hence when the Vatican refused

to approve the Dallas norms, in the early editions and on many editorial pages it became a story about the Vatican wanting to cloak sexual abuse in secrecy, and trying to squelch an American push for autonomy and victims' rights. I can testify from personal experience that I was asked time and again on American television why the Vatican didn't simply let the U.S. bishops do things "their way," as if the issue were primarily one of local control. By the time the dust settled, things looked rather different. As Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese of *America* magazine has written, the Vatican played a role analogous to the ACLU, insisting on protecting the canonical due rights of priests. Many canonists, and not a few American bishops, believe the norms that the "mixed commission" of Vatican officials and bishops decided upon in October 2002 were an improvement over Dallas. The norms thus struck a number of experts as a case in which, all things considered, the Vatican got things about right.

This was not, however, the dominant public impression. Rather than several weeks of positive press about cooperation between the Vatican and the U.S. church, the period from June to October 2002 was reported largely as a tug-of-war over power between Rome and America, with the substantive issues getting short shrift. My primary concern is not that the Catholic Church missed an opportunity to turn its public image around, although it did, and with disastrous consequences. As a journalist, my primary concern is that these Vatican myths obscured the vision of many of my colleagues of the story unfolding before their eyes. This, surely, is one of the reasons that we sometimes struggle to hear the voice of Peter in American culture.

Still, I am under no illusion that these myths will soon pass from popular use. They are too deeply rooted, and frankly they are too much fun. People enjoy speculating

about who's controlling things in Rome, what secret maneuvers are going on under the cover of night, and what untold riches are tucked away in Vatican vaults. (In a charming "Raiders of the Lost Ark" version of this mythology, a rabbi from Israel recently said he would like permission to search Vatican storerooms, looking for the menorah from the ancient Jerusalem Temple. What leads him to believe it's there? "Because I can't find it anywhere else," he told me.) Perhaps by cataloging these beliefs as myths, however, we can at least nudge perceptions of the Holy See closer to reality, and in so doing, help clear a space in which dialogue between the Vatican and American Catholicism can find calm.

Let me be clear again that I am not talking about a sanitized dialogue, scrubbed clean of conflict. There will always be tension between the universal church and the local churches, and this tension can be a healthy one. There are real disagreements, sometimes between Rome and America, sometimes between conservatives and liberals on both sides of the Atlantic, and sometimes in ways that defy traditional political logic. I am not suggesting that better communication, by itself, will magically make all our problems disappear. I am no fan of a kind of false irenicism that muzzles debate, or an adolescent understanding of loyalty that treats all criticism as a personal attack. In fact, most of the officials in the Roman Curia whom I know would be the last to want to squelch a respectful discussion of their work. They know how deeply they agonize over documents and policy decisions, and how perfectible much of what they do actually is. But for such criticism to be useful it must be informed, non-polemical, and rooted in a profound sense of communion. Fostering such a dialogue requires give on all sides – and here, on this side of the ocean, it may mean a certain demythologization.

Thank you very much.