

Did You Know...



News and trivia from our parish and the Catholic Church
-- contributed by the Christ Child Church Women's Club --



Christ Child Catholic Church

Dedicated to Growth in Christ and to the Challenges of Loving Service

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Vatican -- Whence Came Thee?

Did you know that there used to be a circus in permanent residence on Vatican Hill? Did you know that at one time, the Pope's residence wasn't in Rome, in fact not even in Italy, for over 70 years? And did you know that the Vatican's global status, as an independent sovereign state, was signed into law by Benito Mussolini?

All of us learn about the Vatican from our earliest Catholic teachings, but it's almost always a modern interpretation: "That's where the Pope lives", or something as simple.



But the Holy City has a long, complex, and colorful history, influenced by more than two thousand years of world conflicts, geopolitical intrigue, and theological battles. Here are some of the highlights - - -

The Swamp

The word "Vatican" comes from the Latin *ager vaticanus*, a marshy region on the west bank of the Tiber River. The word is so ancient that even Roman historians cannot agree on its origin, but one plausible theory has it emanating

from the name of the pagan god Vaticanus (who was responsible for infants' first cries).

Before, during, and after Jesus' life, the area was not religiously oriented in any way; in fact, Nero used it for chariot-race exercises. But when St. Peter was martyred at the base of Vatican Hill, the Vatican region took on a new scope and a new meaning.

[Side comment: Can you imagine a "religion" (paganism) where multiple gods' duties were divided as minutely as being responsible for a baby's wail? Small wonder that the beauty and simplicity of Christianity found so many eager followers.]



By the first century A.D., the old marsh had become an enclave of empire administrators, with expensive villas for the upper crust of society. In fact, it was the daughter of Caligula who housed her own private circus within the Vatican region.

But after Peter's martyrdom, his tomb was also there, and it was becoming a central gathering point for Christians from far and wide.

The Expansion

The true beginning of the Vatican (as we know it today) would have to wait yet another 200+ years. Emperor Constantine created St. Peter's Basilica in the early 300's, and this further cemented the location as a focus for pilgrims. The area soon contained housing for the clergy and a marketplace; it was known as the district of Borgo, and it thrived.



By Thomas Salmon [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

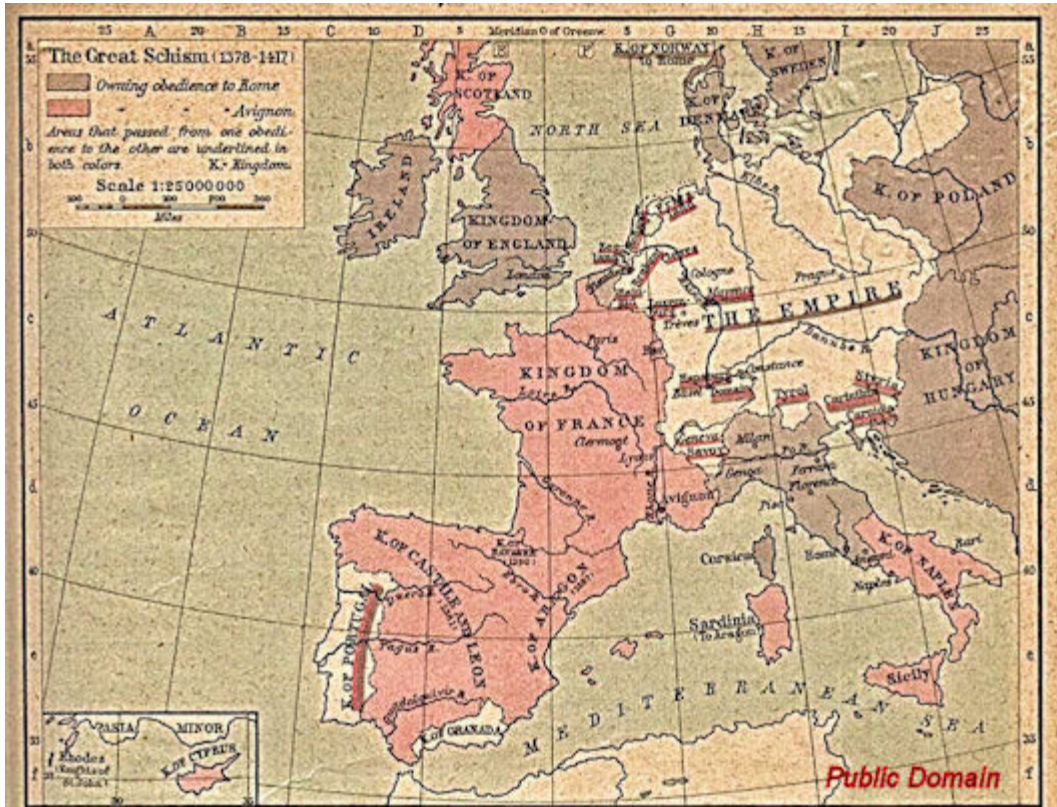
In the mid-850's, a Saracen pirate attack damaged the Basilica. Pope Leo IV caused the walls of the district to be expanded, to enclose and protect the exposed Basilica. Over time, more walls, structures, and causeways were created or expanded, becoming more like the enclave we know today.

The Hiatus

The entire center of the Catholic world literally relocated to Avignon, France in the early 1300's, giving rise to the Avignon Papacy (1303-1378) and a series of seven French Popes. The Vatican was abandoned, and fell into disrepair.

Finally, in 1377, the Papacy was relocated again, back to Rome and the Vatican. But even after the end of the Avignon Papacy, a series of "antipopes" reigned in France (the "Great Schism"), trying to wrest control of the Catholic world back from the Roman Papacy. A quick look at a map of the era (below) shows just how geopolitical the religious world was back in those times.

One can only wonder, what would our world be like if the Avignon Papacy had survived? Would we consist of Roman Catholics and French Catholics? Would there have been religious wars? The mind boggles at the possibilities of that feudal era, when the kingdoms of religion and state were nearly indistinguishable.



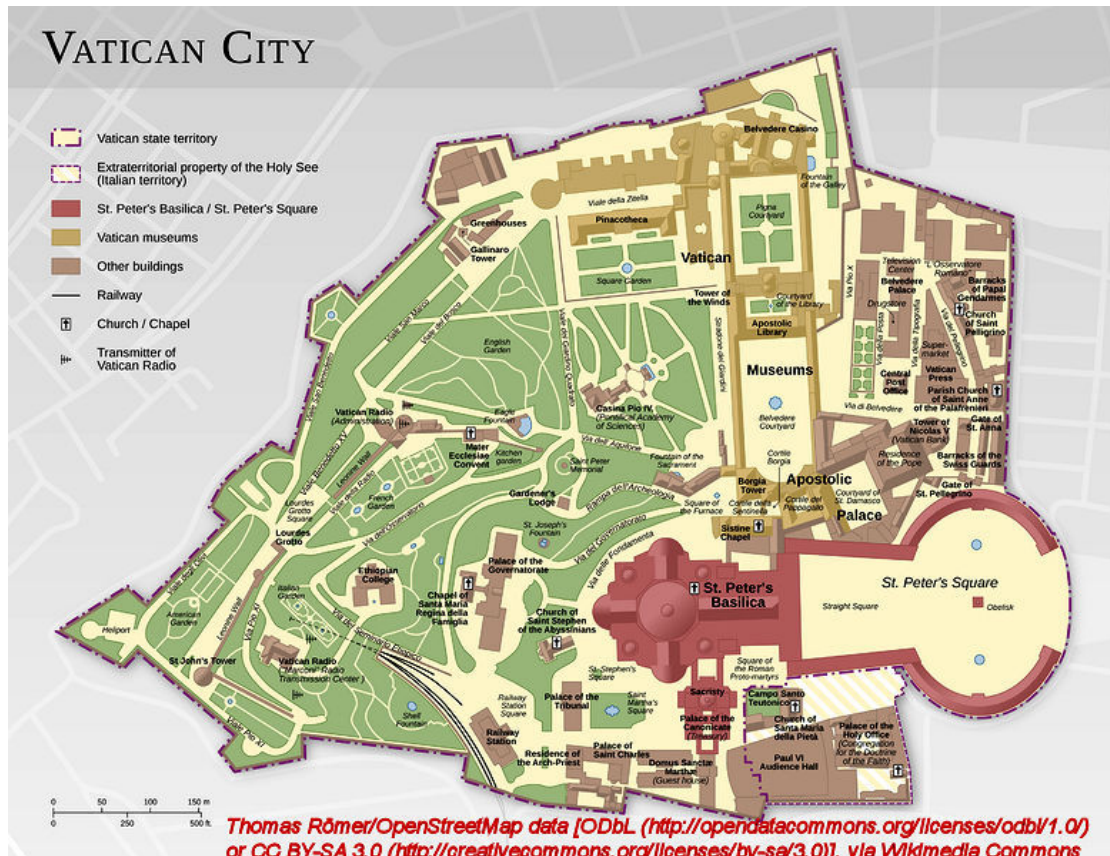
The Smallest Sovereign State

Even after the return of the Papacy to Rome, it was hardly the Rome and Italy that we know today. In fact, the Roman Papacy held governmental power over many regional territories (called Papal States), all the way until 1870 (yes, 20 years *after* California became a U.S. State!). In that year, the previously fragmented Italian government claimed power over essentially all territory outside the Vatican walls.



The Papacy was not fond of this new claim and the loss of broad regional powers; a contentious stalemate was entered for the next 60 years. Finally, in 1929, the Lateran Pacts were signed (by Benito Mussolini), and with the stroke of a pen, the Vatican became the world's smallest sovereign state.

Today, the "nation" of the Vatican is comprised of 109 acres and a population of 600. Its "army" is the Swiss Guard, a special contingent that has been providing Papal security since 1506.



Still Curious? See these links ---

- [Vatican-city](#)
- [Vatican Hill](#)
- [Avignon Papacy](#)
- [Swiss Guards](#)

--- Karin and Greg Illes

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