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How Many Immigrants Does Vatican City Take? Actually, None.

By James S. Robb

Bring up the subject of Vatican City, the Roman Catholic Church's diminutive, privately-owned enclave in the heart of Rome, and it's like playing a game of charades. Animal or Mineral? Independent city-state or diplomatic abstraction functioning only as a secular means to a religious end? Or is it both?

The church's headquarters operates as a legitimate state in many ways. It has its own miniature army, the Swiss Guards (regularly inspected for rogue nuclear warheads, thanks to the Holy See being a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty[1]). It also boasts a semi-official bank (the Vatican Bank, recently rocked with scandal), a prestigious newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, and its own small citizenry.

So surely it also has immigration and refugee policies? How many immigrants are allowed to enter each year? How many refugees are given shelter?

What the church does about accepting outsiders into its own "nation" has at least symbolic importance, because the Catholic hierarchy has been anything but shy in sharing its opinion that other nations should maintain policies of virtually open immigration.

According to John Swenson, executive director of Migration and Refugee Services, U.S. Catholic Conference, the church recognizes the rights of both immigrants and nations, but views the latter with a somewhat suspicious eye.

"The very idea of immigration has a very powerful meaning for Catholics and Christians in general," Swenson explained. "It's the notion that humanity is, in its essence, migratory, in that the earth isn't its final destination, that we're passing through.

"The assertion that *there is and should be an absolute right to immigrate*, including a right to immigrate to improve your economic condition" has been a consistent Catholic teaching for many years, stated Swenson.[2]

"On the other hand," Swenson noted, "since Pope John XXIII [the church has also taught that] the primary duty of the state is to provide for the common good. One way of doing that is to protect its borders." He acknowledged that too many immigrants "concentrated in too limited an area, can cause real economic hardships." Thus, Swenson explained, Catholic teachings support two distinct views in tension. He says a working group of bishops is now trying to hammer out practical guidelines for the state.[3]

Some bishops seem already to have resolved the difficulty in favor of unrestricted migration. As Archbishop Roger Mahony of Los Angeles put it:

> *If the question is between the right of a nation to control its borders and the right of a person to emigrate in order to seek safe haven from hunger or violence (or both), we believe that the first right must give way to the second.*[4]

Moreover, once immigrants arrive — legally or illegally — the Catholic church swings strongly toward immigrant rights. "I would say that while we don't dispute that [the immigrant] may be here illegally," Swenson said, "once here he shouldn't be persecuted, though he may be prosecuted." That is, illegal immigrants must be provided work, housing, education, etc., though the government does have the right to deport him if he is caught.

David Simcox, former director of the Center for Immigration Studies, suggests it may be difficult for the Catholic Church to come up with a fully coherent immigration policy. "They are capable of doing what any lobbying group does," he said, "tacking with the political winds."[5]

Swenson believes part of the tension between the rights of governments and those of immigrants stems from the church's general wariness of nation-state governance. The church is not necessarily committed to the nation-state system for the long term, he said. National governments are means and not ends.

Looked at in this light, perhaps it is ironic that the church operates its very own city-state, Vatican City, a domain whose borders are internationally recognized as inviolate and whose right to make its own laws is unchallenged. All this for a principality covering not quite 109 acres. At one time, however, the church's civil power was much more extensive.

To really get a grasp on what Vatican City — as a state — is all about, you have to go back to the year 312 A.D. when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to the new Christian faith. Overnight Rome went from the great persecutor of Christian faith to the greatest center of world Christianity. To celebrate his new faith, Constantine built a magnificent new church over the traditional burial site of the Apostle Peter. That basilica was replaced during the High Renaissance by an enormous new St. Peter's Cathedral designed in part by Michelangelo. Around the cathedral lay the cluster of buildings and open plazas which make up the Vatican

— the Roman Catholic Church's international headquarters.

"…there is and should be an absolute right to immigrate… illegal immigrants must be provided work, housing, education…"

From the Vatican, the various bishops of Rome (later called popes) presided over their far-flung flocks for a millennium and more. Complications arose, however, starting with Constantine himself. Not long after his conversion, the emperor decided to build and reside in a second capital city, Byzantium, far to the east (present-day Istanbul). He left the civil rule of Rome — not just the Vatican area, but the entire city — to the pope. (The concept of separation of church and state had no meaning in the ancient world.) This arrangement continued for hundreds of years. Then, as the Roman Empire began to break apart, the popes broke with Byzantium, managing to hold onto Rome as their own kingdom.

In the year 754, the French King Pepin gave the pope additional provinces in central Italy to govern directly. These "papal states" were held, and very often fought over, for a thousand years.[6] During much of this time the church, through its popes, maintained armies, conducted wars, exchanged ambassadors, and otherwise behaved like a secular power.

The church's civil power began unraveling in the 19th century. Pope Pius IX nearly fell victim to assassins when revolutionaries violently took the city in 1848. Though the French placed him back on his throne two years later, in 1860 the newly united Kingdom of Italy annexed all the Holy See's territory except for the city of Rome. Finally, the Eternal City itself was taken in 1870, without violence. Furious, the pope sealed himself up in the Vatican, refusing ever to leave again. The Vatican was his last citadel and eventual tomb.[7]

Thus began a long and unpleasant cold war between the Italian government and the Vatican. Neither side recognized the claims of the other (the church wanted compensation for seized property, for example). Finally, in 1929, the Holy See signed a treaty with the Fascist leader Mussolini, which granted independent city-state status to Vatican City.

Today, Vatican City operates something like a miniature Monaco. Totally surrounded by Rome, the city-state is in no way self-sustaining. Yet it does have a large, unionized workforce, a highly professional diplomatic corps, and a fairly good cash flow (due to support from Catholic parishes).

What it does not have is any immigrants. Nor refugees. None. I tried to get the Holy See's official point-of-view on this question by contacting its official representative in the U.S., Archbishop Agostino Cacciavillan, the papal nuncio. His assistant insisted she could answer no questions, and all official questions must be addressed to the archbishop himself in writing. I faxed a few simple questions over in April but received no reply.

So, is Vatican City too tiny to support even a few immigrants and refugees? If you just concentrate on the state's absolute size, 108.7 acres, it seems small indeed. But a cursory statistical analysis suggests that many cities in the United States of similar or greater population density are presently doing much more.

Take New York City, for example. It is huge, with a 1995 metropolitan-area population of 14,648,000, living on 1,274 square miles. That works out to 11,482.8 persons per square mile. If you isolate New York City proper, of course, the density grows much greater. In 1990, New York had a population of 7,311,966 residing on 308.9 square miles — that's 23,671 persons per square mile.[9]

Vatican City, meanwhile, with approximately 1,000 full-time residents[10] sharing 108.7 acres, has a population density of just 5,900 per square mile — a fourth that of New York City.

In 1993, greater New York took in 128,434 legal immigrants, or .877 of its area population.[11] (Illegal immigrants would have swollen that number considerably.) Against that standard, Vatican City should not object to taking a similar percentage of its population, especially with its relatively lower population density. That works out to just 8.7 persons each year (not counting illegals).

Since none at all are accepted, one begins to see a bit of a credibility problem. Namely, why should the Catholic hierarchy ask the United States to do (i.e., accept huge numbers of immigrants and refugees) what its own little country will not?

Perhaps the Vatican would argue that even 8.7 persons a year would eventually overwhelm its resources. In 50 years, after all, that would amount to 435 additional citizens, plus all their offspring. Accounting for the relatively high birthrates of refugee families, 50 years might well see a doubling of Vatican City's population.

Too much of a burden? Exactly. Vatican City will never have more acreage, but neither will New York.

The church, today as embarrassed by the idea of raw civil power as it was formerly enamored of it, has tried to extricate itself from these sorts of paradoxes and ironies by a number of means. The city-state's status as nation is generally played down. Ambassadors are neither sent nor received by Vatican City, for example — that is the function of the Holy See itself. Further, the church's representation at the United Nations is in the name of the Holy See rather than Vatican City.[12]

Writer Jerrold Packard, in his book *Peter's Kingdom*, analyzes the status of Vatican City this way:

> *This minuscule enclave is more easily understood as a kind of headquarters compound for, say, a*

multinational organization doing worldwide business on the level of a greatly magnified IBM or a Boeing Company. Think of [Vatican City] as a legalistic formula designed to ensure that the Catholic Church — which until just over a century ago really did have its very own country — would assume parity with all other sovereign nations….[13]

So, those wanting Vatican City to have it both ways — to be a state when helpful, and a mere administrative campus when not — want to keep the question of immigration fairly abstract.

The church's representatives counter that no private organization in the world is more involved in refugee work than is the Roman Catholic Church. The church spends millions helping to resettle new arrivals. The compassion of the church's hundreds of thousands of workers is legendary. All true — but eventually on someone else's tab, and not in their own backyard.

No one in Vatican City, or in the Vatican Curia, has to think about how to permanently feed, clothe, house, and employ people coming from other lands.

It's high time they did. The Vatican should start welcoming a generous complement of immigrants and refugees — both legal and illegal — for permanent settlement, or it should stop insisting that others do so. ■

NOTES

[1] George Bull, *Inside The Vatican* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1982), p. 142.

[2] Emphases are added by author.

[3] Interview with John Swenson, March 31, 1995. Mr. Swenson, 50, was formerly employed by the U.S. Foreign Service. He is a layman.

[4] Roger Mahony, "Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration," *The Tidings*, April, 1987; cited in David Simcox, "The Catholic Hierarchy and Immigration: Boundless Compassion, Limited Responsibility," *The Social Contract*, Vol. IV, No. 2, Winter 1992-1993. Simcox's article is a primer in recent Roman Catholic teaching on immigration.

[5] Interview with David Simcox, April 3, 1995.

[6] Jerrold M. Packard, *Peter's Kingdom: Inside the Papal City* (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1985), pp. 18-21.

[7] Bart McDowell, *Inside the Vatican* (The National Geographic Society: Washington, D.C., 1991), pp. 191-192.

[8] *Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 1994*, The Census Bureau, 1994.

[9] Table 3, "Cities With 200,000 or More Population Ranked," *County and City Data Book 1*, The Census Bureau.

[10] Packard, p. 8.

[11] "Immigrants Admitted By Selected Country Of Birth And Selected Metropolitan Statistical Area Of Intended Residence, Fiscal Year 1993," The Census Bureau.

[12] Bull, p. 144.

[13] Packard, p. 3.