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What would Christ say if he could see the church today?

by Fr. Peter Daly

Parish Diary

Conclave 2013

Cars registered to the Vatican display license plates with the letters SCV. Officially, those initials stand for *Stato della Citta del Vaticano* (Vatican City State). But Italians say SCV stands for "*Se Cristo Vedesse*" ("If Christ could see it.")

One wonders: What if Christ could see it? What would he say?

Over the next few weeks, in the run-up to the election of the new pope, the world will experience a tsunami of images from Vatican City. Ordinarily skeptical journalists will gush over the art, the architecture, the ceremonies and the history of the Vatican. Predictably, the media will fall in love with its sights and sounds. That's OK for them. They care nothing about our church. But we Catholics, who love our church and see it as the body of Christ made visible, should step back from the pomp and power and consider what image we project.

What would Jesus say if he saw a long parade of cardinals in red watered silk cassocks and lace surplices? Would he think they were vested appropriately as successors of his apostles? He told the 12 to take nothing for their first journey except a walking stick and a single tunic (Mark 6:8-9). Do these men travel in the spirit of the first apostles or in the spirit of Renaissance nobility?

What would Jesus say if he heard bishops addressed as "Your Eminence" or "Your Excellency"? Didn't he tell his followers not to be like the Pharisees, who demanded titles of honor like "rabbi," "teacher," "master" or even "father" (Matthew 23:8-10)?

What would Jesus say if he saw cardinals in long silk capes (*cappa magnas*) processing to seats of honor at ceremonies and styling themselves as "princes" of the church? Jesus criticized the religious leaders of

his own day who demanded seats of honor in synagogues and who "widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels" (Matthew 23:5-6).

What would Christ say if he knew about the Vatican bank, which has been embroiled in scandal after scandal over the last 30 years? Just in February, the Vatican had its ATM services suspended because it was not fully in compliance with international standards on money laundering. Jesus told us we "cannot serve both God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). Would he think we should operate a bank?

What would Jesus think if he saw the enormous treasury of paintings, sculpture, jewels, architecture, vestments, books and precious antiquities accumulated over the centuries by the church? He told us not to store up treasure on earth, where moth and decay destroy and thieves break in and steal, but rather to store up treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:19).

What would Jesus say if he saw some of his most prominent followers preoccupied with expensive rings, jeweled pectoral crosses and gold crosiers while lecturing the world about the sin of greed? Do you think he might say to us, "Blind guides, you strain out the gnat and swallow the camel" (Matthew 23:24)?

What would Jesus say if he realized his church claimed to be a nation among nations with all the rights and privileges of a nation? He said his kingdom was not of this earth (John 18:36).

Before we allow the secular media to wax rhapsodic over the Vatican and all its stuff, we should take a good close look at it for ourselves. We might have to admit some of it is a scandal in the scriptural sense of the word, that is a stumbling block. It is something people trip over and prevents them from coming to Christ. Jesus said it would be better if we had a millstone hung around our necks and were cast into the sea than for us to give scandal (Matthew 18:6).

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Perhaps the time has come for us to downsize, just like we did at the end of the Papal States.

In 1870, when Giuseppe Garibaldi and the troops of the Italian *Risorgimento* invaded Rome, they put an end to the Papal States. The church at the time thought it was a calamity. Pius IX excommunicated some of the leaders of the new Italian state. But today, we see the end of the Papal States as a blessing. We are glad the church does not rule Italy. In fact, the recent elections prove no one can rule the Italians.

The Vatican is the last echo of the Papal States. It was created as a country in 1929 by the Lateran Concordat signed with the government of Benito Mussolini. The Vatican is a little "Potemkin village" of a state, just a façade. It allows us to claim to be an independent nation. Jesus said that we should "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Mark 12:17). He did not say we should become Caesar.

I recognize we need a well-equipped and independent center for the administration of the church. There are many dedicated and holy people working in the Vatican. It is a historical treasure, and we cannot just level it.

But we really could downsize.

This is not some ephemeral concern. It goes right to the heart of who we are as a church and the authenticity of our witness. We cannot lecture the world on materialism in a Christmas homily and a few minutes later elevate a jewel encrusted chalice at the consecration.

What could we do?

To start with, we should close the bank. We could easily contract with major banks to provide our banking services, just like other international organizations. Then we would not have the temptation of managing mammon. The Vatican bank may be relatively small, but it has been a big source of scandal over the years.

We should close our embassies. The pope should be relating to the world as a pastor, not a potentate. Priests should be pastors of souls, saying Mass, anointing the sick, baptizing and teaching the faith. They should not be diplomats attending embassy receptions. With the priest shortage, we need them in the vineyard. If we need to speak to Caesar, we should do it like Jesus before Pilate, in humble truth.

We should transfer the Vatican museum to an independent trust to preserve its treasures for all humanity. But our treasure is not here on Earth.

We need our churches, schools, hospitals, orphanages, refugee camps, convents, rectories and monasteries. We need whatever is necessary for our mission, nothing more.

The church once thought it needed the Papal States. It was wrong.

Some people today still think we need power and pomp to proclaim Christ. They are wrong. Our pretentiousness is an impediment to our proclamation of the Gospel.

What if we were a simpler, poorer, humbler and more authentic church?

What if Christ could see *that*?

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