

The Vatican Reveals Secret Documents: Selling off History

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[Jonathan Tremblay is a Historian and Breaking News Editor for the History News Network]

Historians are abuzz with a new announcement from the Vatican. They will be releasing 105 documents to the public from their secret archives, many of which were never known to even exist. Kept in the vaults of St. Peter for a millennium, this very small sampling of fascinating literary sources would probably not have braved the centuries were it not for the extremely stringent conservation and access policies of the Catholic institution. That being said, these documents are going to be revealed in the form of a volume available at your nearest book store. The Vatican has kept these (among others) treasures of History and will now be profiting from their sale. Why does this make me uneasy?

Among the documents to be released, we will get a first glimpse of correspondence with Mozart and Voltaire, a 1863 letter to Pope Pius IX defending the Confederacy in America, XIVth-century investigation of Templar Knights, 1934 letters from Adolf Hitler to Pope Pius XI, a 1550 note from the artist Michelangelo insisting on his payment that was three months late (for renovating St. Peter's Basilica) and finally, a 1246 letter from Grand Khan Guyuk (Grandson of Genghis) to Pope Innocent IV demanding the Pontiff's homage and submission to the Mongolian Empire.

Each one of these incredible sources has the historical community salivating yet there is an air of unease at the great breadth and variety of the works and the Roman plan to sell them. This not only implies that they are the exclusive property of the Vatican, but it also means that the Vatican will have thousands of critical historical documents to raffle off, a bit at a time, to potentially make billions.

In history, I am not the only one that has felt uneasy about this simony (the Biblical crime of trafficking Church property) and the exclusive secret nature of the archives. In 1881, following unending centuries of accumulating archives for no one to see, one Pope wondered if it was selfish of the Church to hoard and keep secret a bigger collection of historical heritage than anywhere else on the planet. The humanist and progressive Pope Leo XIII opened the archives to professional researchers on the very day he was elected, inviting scrutiny, analysis and diffusion of a huge new part of human history (including some very dark chapters in the history of the Vatican itself). Despite this opening however, it has remained tremendously difficult for ANYONE to gain access to the archives, even with the proper credentials, faith, experience, references and qualifications. That is why a handy book, available to all and perhaps interpreted in a certain way/light/bias would be perfect. This brings me to a second problem.

The Sources Remain Secret

If one is lucky enough to be admitted to the Vatican's secret archives or is clever enough to break in, one could consult the tens of thousands of documents contained therein. Once it is in book form however, the documents may or may not have been edited with a lengthy interpretation that may be included for the (less-instructed) public. This will provide an official Vatican explanation for what was essentially unadulterated History. Now I have no doubt that the Vatican's historians are professionals of great repute but seeing as I do not believe in complete objectivity, there will inevitable be a taint of bias and thus a rewriting of history which sort of defeats the purpose of revealing these primary sources.

And talking of Vatican historians, the historical community has not forgotten how they swindled us with the Donation of Constantine.

In the early 300s AD, the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine I, drafted this edict giving Pope Sylvester (technically held the title of Vicar of Rome at the time) , as successor to St. Peter, "dominion over lands in Judea, Greece, Asia, Thrace, Africa, as well as the city of Rome, with Italy and the entire Western Roman Empire". This was fortuitously revealed centuries later and used by a series of Popes to maintain their political power over the "Papal States" of Italy during times where the Vatican itself was threatened by medieval conquerors. The Donatio effectively defended the holdings of the Popes, around Rome at least, to this day. But wait, there's more. By the 1400s, the suspicious royal courts of Europe had indeed proven the document to be a complete fabrication. It was written around 750 AD by monks and/or Vatican historians (it is assumed) to affirm Christian territorial power in the face of aggressive Lombards and Franks. If you were wondering, it was the language that gave it away; feudal terms (fief) and anachronistic Latin proved that the document could never have been written so early.

With this in mind, it is no wonder that the only way the general population is going to get their hands on the treasure trove of the Vatican is by first submitting the material through intense official scrutiny and interpretation. With all these concerns in mind and on this page, I admit defeat in that I have no other way in EVER seeing these documents and yes, I will be buying the damn thing.

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