

The Vatican City State turns 80

[Home](#) > [Europe](#) > [Italy](#)

 

Historical tension between

Italy and the Vatican echos today.

By [Angelica Marin and Fulvio Paolucci](#) - Special to GlobalPost

Published: February 18, 2009 18:39 ET

ROME — Eighty years ago, the sovereign Vatican City State was born. Now secret documents will offer a window into that historical moment: the treaty negotiations, the territorial questions, the grappling over the appropriate role for the church.

To celebrate its 80th anniversary, Vatican City this week unveiled a commemorative exhibit that traces its history from the 19th-century battles with the Italian state to the modern-day popes.

"Visitors who come to Rome know about the Vatican, but they only know St. Peter's Square and the Vatican Museums," said exhibit curator Barbara Jatta.

Curators say that the exhibit will show how the smallest country in the world runs. Vatican City is 109 acres in size, surrounded by thick walls, gemmed with beautiful gardens, and has the internal structure of a sovereign state, such as a post office, railroad, a sophisticated telecommunication system and a heliport.

It is home to pope and the rule of the Catholic Church, called the Holy See. But this hasn't always been the case, and it is that struggle to maintain control of the eternal city that is the focus of the exhibit, "1929-2009, Eighty Years of Vatican City State."

Following the unification of Italy in the 19th century, the church lost all of its land and several pontiffs shut down all diplomatic relations with the new country. For the next 60 years, the Italian government debated how to respect Italy's Catholic roots without returning secular power to the pope.

The so-called "Roman Question" came to an end 80 years ago when Pope Pius XI and Italian dictator Benito Mussolini agreed to found the

sovereign Vatican City State. The Lateran Pacts of 1929 sealed the agreement.

To give visitors a snapshot of those negotiations, the exhibit contains documents and photographs from the Vatican archives.

"The exhibit displays wonderful unpublished documents," said Jatta, who led the project, "including maps of different proposals that show how Vatican City State could have included more of Roman territory."

The exhibit looks at past battles with the Italian state, struggles that are not simply historical curiosities. The celebrations come at a time when the Vatican is distancing itself from its closest political ally by altering the original document between the two countries.

At the beginning of this year, the Vatican amended the Lateran Pacts and established "The Canon" — the law of the Catholic Church — as the supreme law. The move made all other secular law — including Italian law — both secondary and optional.

Giovanni Maria Vian, director of the Vatican's daily newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano (The Roman Observer), said the new law was a necessary upgrade. "Everyone can see that Italian law is overflowing and contradicting," he said. Vatican officials who wrote the statute said Italy's civil law has become often incompatible with the principles of the Catholic Church.

The Italian government admits that the country has too many laws that are badly written and unclear. But legislators fear that the Vatican's move will undermine their credibility in front of the Italian people.

<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/italy/090217/the-vatican-city-state-turns-80>