

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

THE VATICAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

This is a side issue. With the recent attack on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the on-going, simmering resentment of the unnecessary, forced imposition of the liturgical changes last fall, and the persistent, damaging reality of the clergy sex abuse/cover-up disaster, this issue is very minor.

Here it is: I suggest we no longer refer to the universal Church as the Roman Catholic Church but we call it the Vatican Catholic Church. The Vatican is not part of Rome anymore, so why taint the unique, beautiful city of Rome with the machinations of the Vatican? Let's at least be honest enough to keep the Romans out of it.

I told you it was a minor issue. So, end of column?

Well, let's see. What difference would it make if many of us started using Vatican Catholic Church instead of Roman Catholic Church? Many of us just say Catholic Church anyway. In that case, what would happen if we added the Vatican label in our chatting about Church?

First of all, and this is a side issue to a side issue, just how Catholic are we? Catholic means universal and I get the part about Catholics in all parts of the world. But in terms of how and what we believe, and how we express those beliefs, it seems the Roman Church is becoming less and less universal.

I agree that we need some parameters on what we believe. Being Catholic must have some definable content to it. But those boundaries can be broad or narrow. Catholics in previous ages who believed in heretical superstitions were still considered Catholics. But today the tendency is to narrow those parameters if you are a progressive and to widen them if you are a pre-Vatican II conservative.

How Catholic is that?

Anyway, back to the primary side issue - the Vatican Catholic Church. When we use "Roman" as the adjective describing the Church we attach the history, power, and prestige of the Roman Empire, ultimately the Holy Roman Empire, to the Church. By association, the Church absorbs the unearned *gravitas*, the respected accomplishments of a dominant, political government and culture.

The only reason we are identified as Roman Catholic Church is because the Roman Empire was there first. Sure, it made sense that we would headquartered there during those early centuries. But Italy is not a world power these days, not by any standards. Do we need to remain there today because we have some famous buildings in the neighborhood?

Maybe the Avignon popes had a good idea – get out of Rome. Remember that the Popes were in Avignon, France for about 70 years during the 14th century? How about a papacy today that headquartered in different parts of the world every ten years? It could be done with digital technology and rapid communication. Now, that would be a symbol of universality! Besides, it would break the Italian stranglehold on the Vatican (despite the two recent Popes being non-Italian. Check the ratio of Italian Cardinals compared to any other nationality. Once again, how Catholic is that?)

The least we can do is to name our church correctly. When we refer to our headquarters by where it is, we must say Vatican City. Vatican City is about 110 acres with a population of a little over 800 people, and it is the smallest independent state in the world. Sounds much more humble than “Roman”, doesn’t it? Sounds a lot more like Jesus of Nazareth, doesn’t it?

When we insist on being Roman, we assimilate the baggage of the Roman legacy: the drive to political power and control over nations. We mimic Roman organizational structures. We freeze the times and customs of the early middle ages and transport them into the 21st century, even to the point of petrifying something as transitional as fashion (vestments and clerical dress). Being Roman means being domineering, institutional, ponderous, and downright stubborn.

As far as I know, the Romans of today do not have aspirations of becoming the Romans of old. It is only the Vaticanistas of today who want to become the Romans of old. What a shame! Being humble and insignificant in the presence of world powers is precisely what the church needs and the gospel commands. That posture is not likely when we are Roman. It is possible when we are Vatican.

Maybe this side issue is more central than I thought.

