



ADVERSARY: Former US president Donald Trump meeting Pope Francis at the Vatican in 2017

# In thrall to Trump, US bishops go rogue

**T**HE Vatican Museum is really just an elaborate way of managing the crowds who come to Rome to visit the Sistine Chapel. It's a long corridor to its door.

The museum itself contains some remarkable objects, not least the Gregorian Egyptian rooms housing the mummy of Amenirdis.

She thought she was headed to the Field of Reeds when she died. But instead of an Egyptian paradise, her afterlife is a temperature-controlled cabinet being ogled at by tourists for €17 a pop.

When I was last in Rome, I dutifully followed the crowd through rooms that got narrower and narrower until we reached the unremarkable chapel door.

Along the way I saw so many bits of marble that I truly understood the saying: "Familiarity breeds contempt."

There were a few surprises. Close to the Sistine Chapel hung a subversive portrait of Innocent X from Francis Bacon's 'Screaming Popes' series. Even the Vatican has room for this gay Irish hell-raiser known for his brutalist art. Who says museum curators don't have a wicked sense of humour?

We were packed into the chapel like sardines, with its peace disturbed every few seconds by screams of "SILENZIO" from the security staff.

But never have I been so awestruck. Nothing prepares you for it – no matter how many images you have looked at, or times you have seen it on TV. Witnessing first-hand Michelangelo's handwork is one of the high points of my life.

This week then, I was more than envious of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken who had a private tour of the chapel and an extended audience with Pope Francis during his first visit to the Vatican.

In so many ways, the Vatican's relationship with the US is pivotal to the future of the planet and the future of the Church itself.

Tom  
COLLINS



That sounds apocalyptic. But it's not. Pope Francis is at the forefront of efforts to persuade us all to take climate change seriously.

The evidence of its catastrophic effects is all around us – but most of us are blind to it, or at least blind to our need to take individual responsibility.

In Donald Trump, the pope found an adversary who did all he could to undermine the fight for the planet. President Biden gets it.

As to the Church's future, Trump plays a malign role there too.

Among his many courtiers are a significant number of US bishops – pompous and overambitious prelates out of tune with Francis' determination to refocus the Church around issues of social justice.

In thrall to Trump, they rejoiced when he appointed Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, securing a right-wing majority there; and they lamented his failure to hold the

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presidency for a second term. Some 50 per cent of their flock voted Trump.

Now they have turned their guns on Joe Biden, only the second Catholic to hold the presidency. Biden has become a proxy in their war with the pope.

Bitchiness and backbiting have always been part and parcel of Vatican politics. Take any group of ambitious men scrambling for power and you have the recipe for intrigue, infighting and conspiracies. The history of the Church is full of examples – and not just from the middle ages.

But throw in the potent weapons of social media, Qanon conspiracists and access to right-wing media conglomerates like the National Catholic Register-owned EWTN network and you have more than enough tools to destabilise those with whom you disagree.

The Trumpian faction within the Catholic hierarchy is in the ascendant there and they flexed their muscle on the very day of Biden's inauguration with a mean-spirited warning that they were coming for him, much to the Vatican's annoyance.

Since then, the bishops have upped their efforts with moves which could result in Biden – a devout churchgoer – being denied Communion. They have established a commission to explore ways of forcing Catholic politicians to toe their line.

On the face of it, the faultline is the issue of abortion and the degree to which lawmakers should prioritise Church teachings in discharging their office. But the real target is the pope.

Francis has limited power to check them and time is against him if he is to embed the changes he is making.

Out of step with the real world, their schismatic actions undermine a Church which badly needs to change and a pope who sees through their hubris.

If any pope has the right to scream, it is this one. Where is the Holy Spirit when you need him?

## ON THIS DAY

JULY 1 1921

### De Valera Replies

MR DE VALERA visited Mr Arthur Griffith at Mountjoy Gaol yesterday. The visit was made for the special purpose of consultation over the letter from Mr Lloyd George. Other prominent Sinn Féiners were also taken into Mr de Valera's counsel during the day and late last evening, the following copy of the reply to Mr Lloyd George was issued with the official authority of Dail Eireann:

'Sir – I have received your letter. I am in consultation with such of the principal representatives of our nation as are available. We most earnestly desire to help in bringing about a lasting peace between the peoples of these two islands but we see no avenue by which it can be reached if you deny Ireland's essential unity and set aside the principle of National Self-determination.

'Before replying more fully to your letter I am seeking a conference with certain representatives of the political minority in this country.'

### President Invites Unionists

MR DE VALERA also sent another letter to Sir James Craig, MP; the Earl of Midleton; Sir Maurice Dockrell, MP; Sir Robert H Woods, MP and Mr Andrew Jameson as follows:

'A chara – The reply which I, as spokesman of the Irish nation shall make to Mr Lloyd George will affect the lives and fortunes of the political minority in this island no less than those of the majority. Before sending that reply, therefore, I would like to confer with you and to learn from you at first hand the views of a certain section of our people of whom you are representative.

'I am confident that you will not refuse this service to Ireland... – Mise, Eamon de Valera.'

The five Irishmen thus invited to a preliminary conference are well-known representatives of the political faith called Unionism. Sir James Craig stands for the Unionists of the Six Counties; the others are prominent Southern Unionists.

### Craig's for London

THE meeting of Sir James Craig's Cabinet to consider Mr Lloyd George's letter was held yesterday in Cabin Hill, Knock where Sir James resides. In a letter to the Prime Minister, Sir James referred to the King's 'gracious message on the opening of the Northern Parliament for peace throughout Ireland', adding: 'We cannot refuse to accept your invitation to a conference to discuss how best this can be accomplished.'

DE VALERA lost no time in consulting with the imprisoned Sinn Féin leaders regarding Lloyd George's invitation. His protest against partition cannot conceal the fact that Sinn Féin remained more concerned with 'National Status' than a united Ireland. Predictably, Craig declined de Valera's invitation to talks in Dublin.

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