VATICAN FLAGS

KEYS & CROWNS SINCE 1800

The flags of the Papal States and today’s Vatican

William M. Becker
Figure 0.1. St. Peter’s Basilica & the Vatican Flag, Residenza Paulo VI, 2005 (Extraterritorial Zone)
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For membership information, contact

NAVA
attn.: Membership Committee
Post Office Box 55071 #58049
Boston, MA 02205-5071, USA

e-mail to membership@nava.org, or visit www.nava.org
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Figure 0.2. Vatican flag, Apostolic Palace, Cortile di San Damaso, 2017
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Figure 0.3. Swiss Guard Barracks, 2007

Figure 0.4. Gendarmerie Headquarters, 2010
Foreword

George Weigel

Human beings are endlessly inventive, and two of our most inventive inventions are postage stamps and flags. How does it happen that a small, gummed piece of colored paper gets a letter or parcel from one place to another? That seems odd, if you step back and think about it. Even more curiously, how is it that an often-multicolored cloth, usually attached to a pole, evokes sentiments of loyalty and courage, or, conversely, odium and fear?

The flags that Father William Becker explains in this marvelous book are especially interesting because they represent one of the world’s oldest and yet least understood institutions: the papacy. And as Father Becker takes us through the history of the flags that have been used by popes and institutions affiliated with the papacy (like the Swiss Guard), he offers us a succinct summary of the remarkable modern story of this institution, which has changed dramatically over the past two hundred years.

The first flags in this book date from the years when popes were sovereign rulers of a large swath of Italy known as the Papal States—absolute monarchs who governed largely through clergymen who acted as civil as well as religious authorities. Then the Papal States slowly shrank under the pressures of the drive to unify Italy. After that process was completed by the conquest of Rome and its establishment, by force of arms, as the new Italy’s capital, the popes retired behind the Leonine Wall surrounding St. Peter’s Basilica and the buildings usually known as “the Vatican.” They no longer controlled any territory, but there were still papal flags, for even without territory the popes continued to exercise what many nations recognized as “sovereignty”. Why?

Because the pope, as Bishop of Rome, remained the embodiment of what was, then and now, known as “the Holy See”: a unique entity, with no parallel in the world, recognized in international law and diplomatic practice as the sovereign expression of the pope’s role as universal pastor of the Catholic
Figure 0.5. Palazzo del Governatorato, 2007
Church. Whether the pope controlled territory or not, the Holy See remained, in the language of international law and diplomacy, a “juridical personality”. Thus popes exchanged ambassadors and other forms of diplomatic representation with various countries, even when the pope effectively controlled nothing but the house he lived in, the great basilica named for the first pontiff, and a number of buildings adjacent to St. Peter’s and to the apostolic palace.

That situation changed, and the popes recovered a measure of control over a small territory, with the 1929 Lateran Accords, a set of agreements between the Holy See and the Kingdom of Italy. Those treaties recognized the existence of Vatican City State: a contiguous 108-acre territory around St. Peter’s (plus some non-contiguous, “extraterritorial” properties in Rome and its environs) under papal sovereignty—and the flag of the new state was carefully prescribed in its constitution. This history can seem a minor footnote to the great contests for power that have characterized the modern world. But the endurance of the Holy See, and the capacity of the pope to act internationally without the political interference of another sovereign power, are important for the world as well as the Catholic Church. The tendency of political modernity is to subsume everything within the state. The papal flag reminds us that there is more to the world, even the political world, than states.

Popes no longer wield any real temporal power and Vatican City State is not a significant actor on the world stage. But the papacy is. Under John Paul II, who was pope from 1978 until 2005, the pope and the Holy See exercised greater leverage in world affairs than at perhaps any point since the High Middle Ages—and certainly more authority than at any previous moment in modern history. Thus the papal flag, today, reminds the world that moral truth and conviction continue to play an important role in human affairs. The course of history can be bent in a more humane direction by the power of moral argument and moral witness: that’s what the yellow-and-white banner with the keys given by Christ to St. Peter proclaims.

Flag lovers will be intrigued by the story that Father Becker tells and by the striking images in this book. But *Vatican Flags* is not for flag lovers alone. The story it tells is full of important reminders that there are different forms of power in the world, and that the human condition cannot be reduced to politics alone, or economics alone, or some combination of politics-and-economics alone. The realm of the spirit still counts, and soulcraft shapes the future at least as much as statecraft.

**George Weigel** is Distinguished Senior Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., where he holds the William E. Simon Chair in Catholic Studies.
Figure 0.6. Benedict XVI and Vatican flag, Apostolic Palace, Cortile di San Damaso, 2007
Since boyhood I have loved flags. I recall admiring the shapes and colors of the world’s banners in our home encyclopedia. Among them was the yellow-white flag of Vatican City, bearing the crossed keys and tiara.

I remember, too, when I finally associated that flag with the one displayed in our parish church. My pastor called it “the papal flag”, which confused me, until I learned that the pope lives at the Vatican. He also explained the flag’s emblem: the pope holds the keys of St. Peter, who received them from Jesus Christ: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:19). Other things he couldn’t explain. Why was the flag square in books, but not in our sanctuary? Why were the yellow shades different? Why are the pope’s colors yellow and white?

Later I lived in Rome as a seminarian and priest. For eight years I saw the Vatican flag up close, and studied its Papal States progenitors. I learned that not until the past century did the term “papal flag” imply a uniform design, for in the Papal States, flags varied. For over 30 years my ongoing research was published in installments—and finally, in this book. Here then, is a systematic record of the pope’s legacy in the world of flags—today’s chief symbol of sovereignty. It is especially fitting as the Holy See and Italy observe the 90th anniversary of the Lateran Accords, which established Vatican City’s statehood in 1929.

As always, gratitude is in order. First, I thank the late Dr. Whitney Smith, who directed the Flag Research Center in suburban Boston. For many years he edited the Flag Bulletin, a journal which hosted several of my forays into this topic; and he was an invaluable contributor to my research. A true scholar and gentleman, he introduced me to vexillography—the study of flags. (The
Figure 0.7. John Paul II draped in a papal banner, Colombia, 1986

Figure 0.8. Vatican flag flying above the Vatican Museums, 2004
Whitney Smith Flag Research Center Collection is now housed at the University of Texas at Austin.) I likewise thank the North American Vexillological Association (NAVA) for supporting and publishing this work, as well as Ted Kaye, George Weigel, Scott Mainwaring, Steve Knowlton, Jeannie Galick, Kent McDaniel, and Francisco Gregoric for their expert contributions to the project. I am both humbled and honored.

I also thank various museums, especially the Museo Storico Vaticano, the Royal Museum of the Army in Brussels, and the Musée de la Civilisation in Québec City; several Roman libraries, especially the Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano, and the Biblioteca Casanatense; the Vatican Secret Archives and Swiss Guard archives; Google Books; and a number of Italian devotees of Papal States history, especially Prince Sforza Ruspoli. For all of this able assistance, as well as the scholars listed in my bibliography, I am grateful.

The English writer G. K. Chesterton once marveled at a papal flag flying at a remote Irish farm, fêting it as “a tower of crowns and a parade of keys”. It serves the world’s smallest nation-state, but it also represents a global church; hence, paradoxically, the Vatican flag is among the most widely flown on the planet. To it, I offer this tribute—and to the shepherd who carries its keys: *ad moltos annos vivas!*

![Figure 0.9. The Bishop of Winona-Rochester delivers Rev. Becker’s flag research to John Paul II, 2004](image)
Figure 0.10. Palazzo delle Congregazioni ai Propilei, 2017 (Extraterritorial Zone)
The Lateran Treaty

This book happily anticipates the 90th anniversary in 2019 of the threefold Lateran Accords (1929). Among these, the “Lateran Treaty” affirmed the sovereignty of both the Holy See and Italy, established Vatican City State, and renounced papal claims to the millennium-old Papal States. A Concordat also regularized Roman Catholicism within Italy, and a Financial Convention compensated the pope for the loss of his old lands.

Among these accords, the Lateran Treaty interests us here. It has succeeded beyond expectations, in resolving the “Roman Question” that bedeviled diplomats well before the creation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, or its seizure of papal Rome in 1870. Among the Treaty’s accomplishments has been the creation of a new “Papal State” with flexible borders and willing inhabitants, who now fly the papal flag proudly.

This “flexible” territory is due not only to Vatican City itself, but even more, to the 17 zones of the Holy See that currently enjoy full extraterritorial immunity under the Treaty, and successive agreements based upon it. These zones augment the papal state, and host shrines, offices, and educational and religious institutes throughout Rome and its environs. Several zones are in the Vatican area, and others beyond it; but when combined with Vatican City’s 108 acres, the Holy See’s civil jurisdiction comprises about 2 square miles in total. (Curiously, that tempers the Vatican’s honor as the world’s smallest nation-state, for its civil jurisdiction is actually larger than Monaco’s; and additional sites are immune from Italian seizure.)

The borders of this enlarged papal state are also highly adaptable, because new zones are typically established or suppressed through a simple diplomatic “exchange of notes” with Italy, rather than concluding a full-fledged treaty
Figure 0.11. Residenza Paolo VI, 2017 (Extraterritorial Zone)

Figure 0.12. Palazzo dei Convertendi, 2018 (Extraterritorial Zone)
(though at times, that is done). Comparable arrangements elsewhere in the world don’t exist—especially since the zones flex when needed, exceed Vatican City’s area by roughly twelve times, and fly its flag more widely.

The outcome is not without its ironies. Today most of the extended Vatican area is owned by the Holy See (and is often extraterritorial), or is lodged by diplomats accredited to it, or is reliant on it for tourism and commerce; and the entire area has become the heart of the augmented papal state. But in 1870, neither the residents of the district nor the pope himself would settle for such an arrangement.

That year, about to seize Rome and the surrounding Lazio region, Italy proposed that the pope accept a reduced state in the Vatican area called the “Leonine City”. This comprised the Vatican and Borgo area within the Leonine walls, on the west side of the Tiber River, opposite Rome proper to the east. (The name gave birth to the smaller “Vatican City” in 1929.) Pius IX declined, stating that even if the then-Italian government wanted to keep its word, it might not be able to do so. History must unfold first.

That is, a democratic Italy might one day reverse course, and seize the microstate too; and indeed, Italy was about to break its promise not to attack Rome in the first place. Still, when Italy’s army seized Rome on 20 September 1870, the Leonine City was left inviolate, to preserve the prospect of papal rule there. The pope insisted that Italy occupy it due to likely protests by its residents against continued papal rule. Once occupied, the papal flag was lowered over the adjacent fortress, Castel Sant’Angelo, on 21 September. (Ironically, the son of the fort’s commander would write the official flag study in 1929 which recommended the current Vatican flag design.)

After Pius declined the offer, Italy provided lesser guarantees based on an earlier concept. The latter suggested the pope’s own person be regarded as sovereign, but without sovereign territory. Whatever building he inhabited would then become extraterritorial by virtue of his presence. (The problems inherent in such a “roving” sovereignty are apparent; but the notion is echoed in current provisions that, whenever the Sovereign Pontiff assists ceremonies at any Italian church, it becomes extraterritorial for the occasion.)

This concept of personal sovereignty laid the basis for the Law of Guarantees enacted by Italy in 1871. That law accorded the pope a sovereign’s honors (but not the actual status), and treated his immediate residence with rights akin
Figure 0.13. Italy’s Quirinal Palace, Papal Visit, 2008 (Former papal residence; current presidential residence)
to extraterritorial immunity. The result was not permanent; but in retrospect it seems a germ of the Lateran Treaty’s distinction between today’s sovereign microstate and those external zones governed by it.

In hindsight, conflicts over papal sovereignty were partly due to the shifting paradigm of sovereignty itself. For roughly a millennium, “sovereignty” implied a divine right to rule, as enshrined in noble lineage; and the Church itself was understood as a sovereign entity, headed by the pope. His right to rule it was found in divine scripture, and his See was often held or surrounded by an array of nobles among the bishops, cardinals, lower clergy, and others.

That all underwent a violent watershed during the French Revolution. The bloody events that ensued convulsed Europe; and only in time would sovereignty be reconceived globally, as the “popular will,” enshrined in a territorial state. Once that new paradigm held sway, the pope’s inherent sovereignty demanded territory, even a nominal amount. But it first required Italy to acknowledge the Holy See as sovereign by nature, and not by mere beneficence, whether Italian or international—though both are also key.

Whether papal sovereignty is rooted in divine or civil law—as was sometimes debated—is hardly the point. It is simply self-evident, because no civil leader of sound mind could pretend to govern the spiritual leader of a global Church with (currently) over a billion souls (just as no pope could again expect to rule a large state). Once Italy accepted the principle of “inherent” papal sovereignty, and the pope was ready to accept a microstate, the groundwork was laid for a solution; and the Lateran Treaty could be born.

All this shows that in the search for peace anywhere, ideas that seem less credible in one era, often bear fruit in another. In this light, one wonders whether the successful sharing of Rome between Italy and the Pope—negotiated after 70 years of acrimony between the two sides—could be a model of sorts for other conflicted lands. (The potential future sharing of Jerusalem comes to mind; exchanges of sovereignty and/or extraterritoriality between Israel and Palestine have been proposed there, too.)

Indeed, just as Vatican and Italian flags now fly alongside each other throughout Rome in amity and goodwill—a display once unthinkable—perhaps other flags might one day do the same. To that end, may leaders of goodwill flourish and prevail; and may the Bishop of Rome and his yellow-white banner help to inspire their cause.
Figure 0.14. Francis and Vatican flag, White House, Washington, D.C., 2015
Notes on Illustrations

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Figure 1.1. The emblem of the papacy: the tiara and keys

Figure 1.2. Papal States map with dates of annexation to nascent Italy