

The Global Reach of Vatican Radio

By Julie Bourbon

It is called the Pope's Radio and it was the first international broadcasting station, even before the BBC. Founded by Pius XI on February 12, 1931, it has broadcast continuously, first in Rome and now around the globe, for almost 75 years.

Inaugurated by Guglielmo Marconi himself and overseen then as now by the Jesuits, it was a momentous occasion, captured by movie cameras from Paramount News; it was the first time in the history of film that exterior footage was shot with a live soundtrack. Like a shot heard round the world, Pius' words were thus captured for posterity: "Listen, O Heavens, to that which I say; listen, O Earth, listen to the words which come from my mouth... Listen and hear, O Peoples of distant lands!"

"This is a pride for the Catholic Church," said Fr. Pasquale Borgomeo (ITA), who has served for 20 years as the director general, and 15 years before that on staff. His office occupies a building near St. Peter's and the Castel Sant'Angelo on the Piazza Pia in the heart of Rome.

Throughout its history, Vatican Radio has been considered principally an evangelization tool. Begun in the halcyon days of radio, its early programs were primarily the results of studies by the Pontifical Academy. "We had very aristocratic programs," said Borgomeo with a laugh. "They were absolutely inaccessible to the public audience." Today's broadcasts are quite different.

Previously much more restricted to religious information, Vatican Radio has expanded its format to include general news, current affairs and music. Programming falls under multiple categories, including church and solidarity, culture and society, Vatican documents, ecumenism, family, youth, justice and peace, science and ethics, and politics. A recent afternoon spent listening on the East coast ranged from salsa music to French commentary to vintage Culture Club. It also follows the apostolic works and accompanies the pope on all his travels.

Once transmitted via rotating antennae with a listening audience stretching a mere 20 kilometers from Rome, its reach is now absolutely global: Africa, Asia, India, Eastern Europe, Latin America, North America, Australia. Today, more than 1,040 radio stations in the world rebroadcast Vatican Radio programs, and streaming audio is available 24 hours each day on the website, www.vaticanradio.org.

"It is catechetically very, very important," said Borgomeo.

During the Cold War, Vatican Radio served as a tool for reaching Catholics behind the Iron Curtain, both to support the faith in a persecuted church but also to keep alive the traditions and cultures of small countries. It was a vehicle for sending messages to prisoners during World War II, broadcasting more than one million messages in cooperation with the Red Cross. Today Vatican Radio programs can be heard on a Mormon radio station in Salt Lake City and a Vietnamese station in San Francisco. Local radio stations throughout the world rebroadcast programs and Vatican Radio staff work within the cultural context of the country to provide a format that is most appealing to its potential audience, although no manipulation of content is allowed.

Much of that content comes from journalists representing more than 60 nationalities and 39 languages who make their home in Rome, with more than 80 correspondents abroad, sometimes two or three in each major capitol. Over 200 people work in the programming department alone, and 18 Jesuits are on the staff.

The apex of Vatican Radio may have come during John Paul's papacy. He visited more than 130 countries, broadcasting his visits each time; Borgomeo accompa-

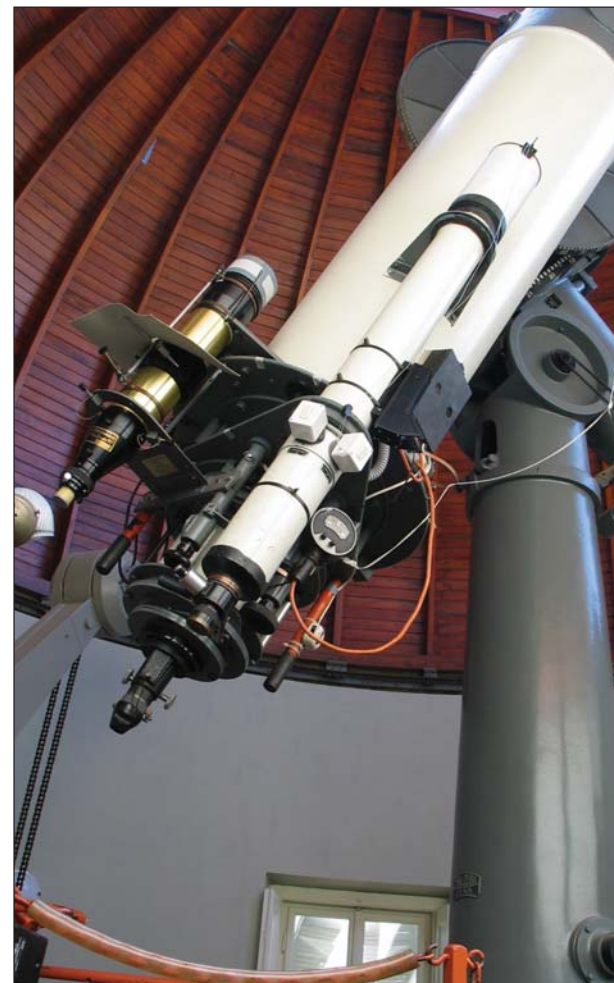


The Vatican Observatory

Fr. Sabina Maffeo (ITA), of the Vatican Observatory, stands on the roof of the pope's summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, 25 kilometers outside of Rome, where he has worked since 1985. A physicist by training, Maffeo built a telescope as a teenager to observe the rings of Saturn. Pointing to the domes of the telescopes at Castel Gandolfo, he called them the "domes of science and the domes of religion." His book, "In the Service of Nine Popes. 100 Years of the Vatican Observatory," gives an authoritative history of the subject.

The Vatican Observatory (Specola Vaticana) was founded in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII; it was moved from Rome to the countryside on Lake Albano in the 1930s due to light pollution in the city. It is one of the oldest astronomical research institutions in the world and, since 1906, has been overseen by the Society of Jesus. The Observatory at Castel Gandolfo is home to a summer school program every two years for university astronomy students and is a site of frequent tours for students and amateur astronomers. It houses a library and a collection of rocks and metals from the moon and from meteors. Today, its dependent research center, the Vatican Observatory Research Group, is hosted by Steward Observatory at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Major research is done there.

Leo XIII, who had a special interest in science, supported the Observatory, he wrote, so "that everyone might see clearly that the church and her Pastors are not opposed to true and solid science, whether human or divine, but that they embrace it, encourage it, and promote it with the fullest possible dedication."



Photos by Julie Bourbon

nied him on about half of those trips, and went in advance of the pope on others, to see to the myriad political, diplomatic and technical aspects of any papal visit.

John Paul II was a "splendid communicator," with an "intuitive, instinctual sense" for the medium, said Borgomeo. The first time he heard John Paul speak, the quality of his voice "was extraordinary," he said, mimicking the sharp intake of breath he took at that moment, more than 25 years ago. The late pontiff called

radio the most important instrument of his petrine ministry.

It has certainly demonstrated the power of radio and its appeal to Christians everywhere.

"The concrete life of the church is in the world," said Borgomeo, noting the importance of reaching as diverse an audience as possible. Vatican Radio is "a tool of the exchange, the vital exchange in the church. In Vatican Radio, nobody is national. Nobody is a stranger. Nobody is a citizen."