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LETTER FROM VATICAN CITY

LIBRARY PRIVILEGES

The scholarly priest who tried to make the Church's treasured collection accessible to all lost his job because of questionable business deals.

BY ALEXANDER STILLE

THE Vatican Library sits in the heart of the Vatican—well inside its fortresslike brick walls, constructed in the fifteenth century. To reach the library, one must pass through the Porta di Sant'Anna, a large black-and-gold cast-iron gate next to St. Peter's Square, and proceed, along sidewalks thick with priests, nuns, bishops, and cardinals, to the Cortile del Belvedere, an interior courtyard designed by the great Renaissance architect Bramante. In the early sixteenth century, Pope Paul III, who ruled St. Peter's with the pomp and extravagance of a temporal prince, held feasts in this courtyard and staged mock naval battles, just as the rulers of



Father Boyle, a respected medievalist, tried to bring the library into the digital age.

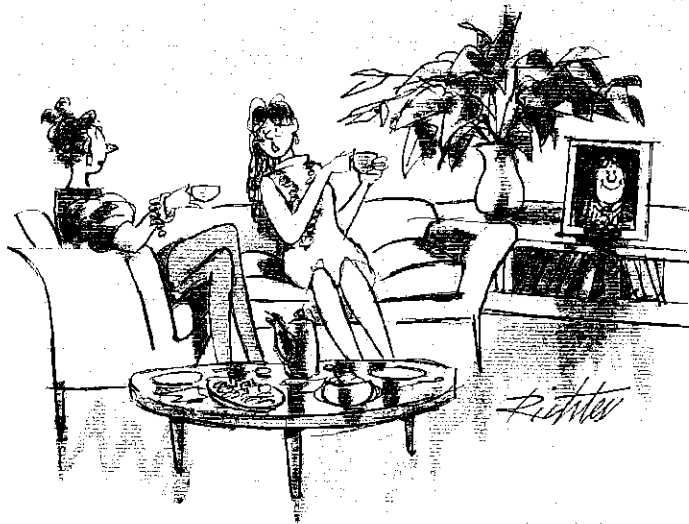
Rome had done in the Colosseum. A disapproving successor, Sixtus V, put an end to these unholy practices in the fifteen-eighties by erecting the library building right in the middle of the courtyard, which is now used mainly as a parking lot. Thus the library, from its inception, has been caught between the Vatican's warring religious and secular impulses.

The library's collection was officially started in 1451 by Pope Nicholas V, a humanist who believed that reviving classical antiquity would usher in a new golden age. With a thirst for learning that bordered on rapacity, he and succeeding Popes sent their emissaries throughout Europe, to North Africa, and to the Middle East to buy, copy, or even steal manuscripts that had sur-

vived the Dark Ages. Over time, however, the expansive spirit of the Renaissance—Nicholas V had declared that the library should be for the "convenience of the learned"—gave way to a darker Counter-Reformation attitude, which held that knowledge was something to be jealously guarded and meted out to a select few, rather than disseminated as widely as possible. An eighteenth-century Spanish priest who visited the library described his frustration at being able to get only a tantalizing glimpse of its riches: visible in a few glass cases were manuscripts of Virgil's Aeneid, and of Plutarch, Seneca, and the Roman playwright Terence. But hidden under lock and key were hundreds of thousands of other treasures, including many founding documents of world civilization: Egyptian papyri, Greek mathematical treatises, the astronomical observations of Galileo, and Mayan codices sent to Rome by missionaries, along with miles of rare manuscripts in Persian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Hebrew, Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese. Because "a silly policy keeps this wonderfully rich library jealously locked up," the priest, Juan Andres, wrote in 1785, he judged the Vatican collection "a cemetery of books, not a library."

Although the library was reopened to scholars in 1883 and underwent modernization earlier in this century, something of its cloistered, inquisitorial atmosphere persisted until 1984, when

PHOTO: JEFFREY M. HARRIS



"That's Norman. He was badly miscast as my husband."

Father Leonard Boyle, a highly learned, charming Irish Dominican priest, was appointed its prefect. Short and delicately built, with jet-black hair and pale skin, Boyle generally has a playful, ironic glint in his eye and a sharp tongue that seems always ready with a joke, which he delivers in his distinct Irish brogue. A renowned scholar of medieval Latin texts, he appeared to exemplify a new breed of twenty-first-century humanist, equally at home deciphering the monastic script of a tenth-century manuscript and talking about bits and pixels with a computer engineer. Boyle firmly believed that the Vatican collection should function as "a library, not a museum." He computerized the library's card catalogue and rewired the main reading room for laptops. He hired women for the first time, relaxed the dress code, and refurbished the café, where conversations held over cappuccino and sandwiches could span two millennia, with modern scholars remarking on how the Renaissance humanists had collected or copied the world's ancient texts. "Father Boyle's Vatican Library reminded me of Raphael's 'School of Athens,'" said one scholar, referring to the famous fresco, which depicts Plato and Aristotle, the

Arab scholar Averroës, and Michelangelo in conversation together.

When I first met Boyle, in 1995, he received me in the Vatican Library in a wood-paneled office, with a crucifix on the wall behind him and a photograph of the Pope opposite. On a laptop computer, he and an I.B.M. executive showed me the prototype for his next bold modernization—a CD-ROM to lead you on a virtual tour of the library and its contents. This was part of a much larger and more ambitious joint venture, with I.B.M., to digitize every page of the Vatican's hundred and fifty thousand rare manuscripts, so that the entire collection could be accessed at computer terminals from Argentina to Beijing. "In using electronic media," Boyle has said, "we are just being our age, just as Nicholas V was, carrying on the tradition of the library as a library of the human spirit."

As I was preparing to return to Rome last summer to write an account of Boyle and the marriage of ancient culture and modern technology, however, I learned that he had been unceremoniously sacked. One day in early May, the studious calm of the library was broken by the arrival of the Vatican police. They sealed off the café, the I.B.M. of-

fice, and two souvenir shops near the Sistine Chapel. Employees were escorted off the premises as if they were criminals. Father Boyle was out of the country, at a scholarly conference, but when he returned, the curt announcement of a new prefect appeared in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper. Having set out to describe Boyle's bold leadership of the library, I ended up investigating its unravelling.

THE Vatican is an institution that prefers to deal with scandal discreetly and is generally indulgent toward those who stray. When Archbishop Marcinkus, the head of the Vatican bank, was implicated in a major financial scandal, the Vatican protected him, and paid out hundreds of millions of dollars. For the Vatican hierarchy to be so heavy-handed with Father Boyle, a man who had devoted his entire life to scholarship and the Church, was highly unusual and invited interpretation. After all, Father Boyle was close to retirement age and, presumably, could have been eased out gently. Someone evidently wanted to discredit him, and in a highly public fashion.

Since then, the scholarly community in Rome has been buzzing with conspiracy theories. According to one scenario, Church conservatives sought to prevent Father Boyle—a highly independent man and a suspected "liberal"—from possibly ascending to the College of Cardinals that would elect the next Pope. Five of seven former library prefects had been elevated to cardinal, and, with Pope John Paul II now barely able to walk unassisted, many saw Boyle's ouster as a bit of political jockeying in anticipation of the next conclave. Boyle dismissed this theory. "I never wanted to become a cardinal," he told me. He had joked, "I'm not interested in some second-rate job—the Papacy or nothing!"

In any event, it is clear that Boyle's effort to make the library more accessible had its costs: pages from a precious illuminated manuscript turned up on the American art market in 1995, apparently having been stolen by

LETTER FROM VATICAN CITY

a scholar whom Boyle had allowed to be left alone with them. Boyle's open style also earned him powerful enemies within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. For example, some members of the College of Cardinals opposed a project of his to put seventy-five thousand images from the Vatican Library on optical disk. And Boyle had once questioned an order from the Holy Father to give the President of Mexico a precious Aztec-era manuscript. Boyle had also refused the Vatican Secretariat of State's request that he ban from the library a scholar who had published a book that embarrassed the Holy See. "Boyle is being punished for doing what none of his predecessors managed," one priest-scholar at the Vatican speculates. "Making the library work."

The actual reasons for Boyle's firing, however, turn out to be considerably more complex. In order to finance his ambitious modernization program, he made some very questionable business deals, which landed the Vatican in a terrible legal tangle. In particular, in 1988, he assigned exclusive worldwide rights to the images in the library to a California businesswoman named Elaine Peconi (then Iannessa; she remarried in 1995), who planned to license an array of books, jewelry, clothing, souvenirs, films, and CD-ROMs. Boyle did not know that she had recently filed for bankruptcy, or that an investor she brought into the project had owned a failed savings and loan. Eventually, the whole matter wound up in court in California; after six years of litigation, the Vatican settled the case for \$8.8 million, and was also hit with \$1.3 million in attorneys' fees.

Yet, in an odd way, Boyle's business blunders were perfectly in keeping with the culture of the Holy See. "The Vatican is like a very complex provincial court of the eighteenth century, which is highly informal in its handling of its money," a scholar who has acted as a consultant at the Vatican for many years told me. Traditionally, the Vatican has been profoundly distrustful of the world of big business, and still prefers to deal with individuals rather than with large corporations. For example, Boyle, fear-

ing potentially embarrassing associations with controversial recording artists, turned down a possible deal with CBS, but signed a contract with a little-known businessman without even receiving a résumé. "It's the old problem of trying to serve both Christ and Mammon," one experienced Vatican official said. "Our fundamental mission is religious, but we have economic needs, like any other institution. We're better at the first than the latter." Then, too, he went on to say, "There is a principle here: sometimes it is easier to ask forgiveness for something that is already done than to ask permission." In other words, given the conservative and slow-moving Vatican bureaucracy, Boyle may have felt that the only way he could modernize the library was to cut his own deals.

BECAUSE of the Vatican collection's centrality to world culture, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace offered to undertake an ambitious cataloguing project at the Vatican in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. A million and a half printed books were catalogued, and a modern conservation laboratory was set up, but to this day the only listings for tens of thousands of manuscripts are handwritten notations in Latin, Italian, and French. And since the collection grew in the course of centuries by subsuming numerous other libraries—of queens, princes, cardinals, and Popes—many documents are still



listed as parts of these different collections. One therefore needs to know a considerable amount about the history of the Papacy to find what one is looking for. Innumerable items remain noted only in the sketchiest form, their contents virtually unknown. This situation has led to endless conjecture, rumor, and legend as to the Vatican collection. Many Jewish scholars suspect that countless Hebrew texts, supposedly burned during the Inquisition, lie secreted among its labyrinthine shelves. There is also a widely held belief (probably erroneous) that the Vatican possesses one of the world's richest collections of pornography.

While the free-spending Popes of the Renaissance spared no expense when it came to building up the collection, the

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current Vatican, understandably, feels the need to concentrate on its religious mandate. "There is no money for culture," Cardinal Alfons Stickler, who was Boyle's predecessor as prefect, laments. These days, the Vatican pays the salaries of eighty library employees who stack books, write catalogues, work in the preservation and photographic laboratories, and run a small publishing department. The library's main discretionary funds are roughly five hundred thousand dollars earned each year from selling postcards and catalogues and charging scholars for photographs, photocopies, and microfilm. This tiny amount must cover all new acquisitions of books and periodicals, office supplies, and capital improvements.

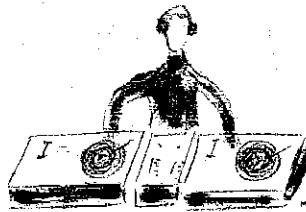
In 1981, Stickler was able to raise enough money to build temperature-controlled stacks for the manuscript collection by making a commercial arrangement with the German publishing company Belser, which acquired the rights to produce expensive facsimile editions of eighty Vatican manuscripts. The German Council of Bishops put up four million dollars for the improvements, agreeing to be repaid from the proceeds of Belser's book sales. When sales did not go as planned, Belser declared bankruptcy, and the bishops had to absorb a considerable loss. Stickler, however, emerged unscathed. "I had the German bishops do all of the financial arrangements," he explained to me, and then made the gesture of wiping his hands. Observing this shrewd pantomime, I understood why Stickler was in a purple cardinal's robe, receiving me in a vast, well-appointed apartment on St. Peter's Square, while Father Boyle was living at the Church of San Clemente, near the Colosseum, wearing the same threadbare clothes I had seen him in years earlier.

Boyle's home is a metaphor for the cultural continuity of Rome. The church one enters at ground level dates from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; its lowest level consists of both the remains of a clandestine Christian church from the first century A.D. and a Mithraeum—a place of worship of the oriental cult of Mithras, which was popular in pagan Rome. One day, when Boyle was doing archaeological work at the church, he uncovered an ancient Roman mosaic. That evening,

an older Dominican took him to task for digging up the floor, telling him he should have left it for posterity. To which Boyle replied, "But aren't we also posterity?"

When I returned to San Clemente to interview Father Boyle last summer, a few months after his firing, he had lost fifteen or twenty pounds from his already slight frame and appeared to have aged ten years. But he still had the same colorful, down-to-earth manner and irreverent sense of humor. Born in Donegal, Ireland, in 1923, Boyle was first educated in Gaelic and has always remained close to his working-class Irish roots. He also has impeccable academic credentials, which had made him a natural choice as prefect: he had distinguished himself as a medievalist at Oxford, where he discovered his passion for Latin paleography—the art of deciphering medieval manuscripts—and between 1956 and 1984, he had taught paleography in Rome and Toronto, published numerous books and articles, and come to know the Vatican collections as well as anyone alive.

Indeed, Father Boyle had become something of a legend in the scholarly community. He worked like a detective, treating every tiny detail of an ancient text—the script and abbreviations used by the copyist, and the materials and the condition of the document—as a clue to its history. He reconstructed the often adventurous lives of early books—they sometimes travelled from one end of Europe to the other, surviving exile, war, and theological disputes—and found that their peregrinations revealed the intellectual and cultural currents of medieval Europe. His trained eye could discern the zeal, the loving attention, the distraction, or the growing fatigue of a scribe. In one case, as he traced an increasingly uncertain hand coming to an abrupt halt, he concluded that the writer had probably died in midsentence.



While Father Boyle has received most of the blame for the library's legal problems, it was, in fact, Cardinal Stickler who first introduced him to the California businesswoman Elaine Peconi and encouraged him to make the deal that proved his undoing. Peconi had previously sold television advertising and run a public-relations firm in the Los Angeles area. Everything about her is larger than life: a statuesque woman of sixty with a helmet of gray-blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a loud, strident voice, she resembles the heroine in a Wagner opera, though she generally wears a sweat-suit and jogging shoes. She speaks in long arias, moving from peals of laughter to thunderclaps of anger. She and her husband live alone on a ranch with two large houses in the San Bernardino Mountains, two hours east of Los Angeles. Peconi is a woman of great energy and optimism who has a grandiose vision of the world. She initially projected that the Vatican Library licenses would earn a hundred million dollars in profits each year, and she still insists that her business is worth a quarter of a billion dollars.

Peconi's family had many ties to the Catholic Church, and she was able to arrange some meetings with people at the Vatican in 1987. Her original idea had been to market dolls based on objects in the Vatican collection; knowing almost nothing about its contents, she first approached the Vatican Museum, but it rejected her proposal. She got a much more positive reception from Cardinal Stickler, who, after leaving the job as prefect of the library, had been made Cardinal Librarian. Peconi says Cardinal Stickler told her that when he took over the Vatican Library he had a conversation with a high-level Vatican official who told him, "Go out and find the money and I will absolve you of everything."

Cardinal Stickler told me that he recalls meeting Peconi but doesn't remember much about their conversation. "I have several letters from this man who now claims to barely know me," Peconi declares indignantly. Indeed, when I visited her, in California, she showed me several long letters from Cardinal Stickler, which had a warm, personal tone. Most important, she has one from 1988, which is

LETTER FROM VATICAN CITY

57

filed in court and bears the Vatican Library seal, and in which Cardinal Stickler states "ELAINE IANNESSA (et al.) has my authorization to act as my agent to secure a Licensing contract with the Biblioteca Vaticana." Stickler also signed a letter stating that Father Boyle was "the legal representative duly appointed by the Vatican and has the only legal right to sign contracts binding" the library.

In 1988, when Peconi met Father Boyle, she began to polish her business plans. As she came to know the hidden riches of the library, her head began to whirl with commercial possibilities: books, CD-ROMs, greeting cards, scarves, jewelry, religious vestments, commemorative coins, and collectible items. Father Boyle was both charmed and appalled by Peconi's untutored enthusiasm. "She had a great facility for getting names mixed up, particularly Bramante, Bernini," he testified in one deposition.

According to Peconi, the library had already rebuffed business overtures not only from CBS but also from J. C. Penney and American Express. "I think they were afraid to get involved with a large corporation, and I think they thought that because I am a woman they could control me," Peconi says. Boyle relied on the good word of a Los Angeles priest instead of conducting a financial-background check on Peconi. Had he done that, he would have learned that she and the man who was then her husband had filed for bankruptcy in 1987. (The filing was dismissed when a bank foreclosed on their home in Pasadena.)

Boyle suggested the name of the company—the Cortile del Belvedere—but he otherwise had little patience for details of the business. In 1988, he and Peconi narrowly escaped entering into a partnership with a man who turned out to be a professional con artist. "Father was naïve, and he was greedy—greedy for the Vatican Library," according to Peconi, who then proposed another investor, Leroy Carver III. Peconi knew Carver's father, who had run a Rolls-Royce dealership in Southern California, but she claims not to have known that the younger Carver, while he was successful in real-estate ventures, had also owned a savings and loan in Escondido, which had failed in

1989, costing American taxpayers about sixty million dollars. (Carver has testified that she did know.) Carver appears to have emerged from the S. & L. failure with his personal fortune intact, and he was eager to invest in Cortile del Belvedere. Both Boyle and Peconi now say they had reservations about Carver; but this did not stop them from agreeing to give him a forty-per-cent share of the profits of Cortile del Belvedere, in return for a nonrefundable payment to the library of three million dollars, together with a million and a half dollars in operating capital. The contracts were drawn up exclusively by Carver's attorneys; Boyle did not even have them examined by a Vatican lawyer. Peconi requested a copy of Carver's résumé, but they closed the deal before it arrived. "Elaine to me was a person who had a very good idea, but she was not sophisticated enough to make this thing bulletproof," I was told by Suzelle Smith, an attorney who represented the library when Carver sued to recoup his money. "This deal was bigger than she was."

Within a few months, the relationship between Carver and Peconi began to sour. He had expected her to move to Rome right away and became impatient when she delayed. Eventually, Carver drove up to Peconi's house, in Lake Arrowhead, and discovered that she had recently moved—to the grand Casa Felice quarters, where she still lives. Carver suspected that this expensive new home might have been bought with some of the three million dollars he'd invested, and at a certain point he stopped making previously agreed-upon payments into the operating account of Cortile del Belvedere. Peconi then accused him of breach of contract and rescinded their agreement. In April, 1990, just nine months after forming the partnership, Carver sued.

In the course of litigation, Carver was able to confirm that Peconi had bought her new home with cash from the Vatican Library. Nine days after receiving the three million dollars from Carver, Father Boyle had made a wire transfer to Peconi for a million and a half dollars, and within a month she

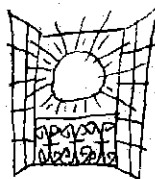
had paid for the Casa Felice property with a million in cash. Carver, in his lawsuit, referred to the transfer as a "kickback." Boyle maintains that he gave the money to Peconi purely as a loan, to be paid back with interest. "There was nothing in the contract that says I couldn't take a loan," Peconi declares. "I paid back the loan—it was a legal loan." (Peconi did pay back the principal of the million-and-a-half-dollar loan in 1994, but she still owes the library some of the interest.) This apparently innocent explanation was undercut, though, by a typed note from Peconi to Boyle which was produced in court. It read:

Dear Father,

This letter will serve as my "note" to you. . . . May I borrow back \$1,500,000.00 from your share. This will be used to pay back some of the monies I have borrowed over the years to keep this project afloat. . . . I just don't think it is right for me to leave with all the bills behind me. . . . I can't feel good about it. . . . I will repay you immediately from the sale of the first license. Thank you Father, I prefer to keep this between you and I, Father.

"The whole thing was naïve enough to appear like collusion," Boyle told me later. Moreover, he said, Peconi had never told him that she intended to use the money to buy a house. "If I were an ordinary member of a jury, I might have thought it looked bad, too," he added.

Although the Holy See later accused Boyle of acting entirely on his own, he testified that he had consulted the Vatican's Secretariat of State when Carver filed his lawsuit, and that he had been told to handle the matter himself. As a trial date drew near, following the six-year discovery process, Boyle began to push for a settlement but didn't have the funds to meet Carver's demands. (Carver wanted his initial three-and-a-half-million-dollar investment, plus interest and six years of attorneys' fees.) Boyle had to appeal to his superiors at the Vatican. "Only on April 14, 1995," a Vatican complaint filed against Peconi states, "did Father Boyle give further information to the Prefecture for Economic Affairs concerning the case and declared that he committed the grave error of not having presented the entire situation at the right time to the com-



petent Ecclesiastical Authority." The Office of Economic Affairs took over the litigation, hired its own lawyers, and, in 1996, reached the \$8.8 million settlement with Carver; Peconi agreed to pay half that amount back to the Vatican.

A few months afterward, Boyle was asked to step down. He arranged to leave on May 24, 1997, the thirteenth anniversary of his arrival as prefect, so that his early retirement would not give rise to gossip. Three weeks before that date, however, the Vatican decided to carry out its police blitz, casting a heavy cloud of suspicion over Boyle's departure. The Holy See also declared all the library's contracts with Peconi and her licensing subcontracts null and void, on the theory that Father Boyle had been acting without authorization, but that may have compounded the problem. "I own the Vatican Library! And there's nothing they can do about it," Peconi told me in December of 1997. "As long as Father Boyle was there, I would never have done anything against them, but now I am going to sue them," and, indeed, she has since sued the Vatican for fraud and breach of contract. (On

August 7th of this year, a California judge decided that the case will be tried in a United States federal court.)

Despite the lengthy litigation, however, Cortile del Belvedere had become profitable. In 1992, Peconi struck a half-million-dollar deal with Turner Publishing, which produced a lavishly illustrated family Bible that sold very well. A Bahamian company, Illuminated Filmworks, paid three million dollars for film and CD-ROM rights. Another company paid nearly a million and a half dollars to produce christening gowns, bronze figurines, and greeting cards. Echo Design Group bought the rights to reproduce images on scarves, ties, and linens. Other companies made rosaries, religious vestments, pillows, and greeting cards. "They produced things of very good taste, which are selling in Neiman Marcus, Marshall Fields, and the finest emporia in the United States," Boyle says. Boyle himself was, in fact, a considerable asset to the new business. "If somebody was looking for a certain kind of image, he knew exactly what would be right, because nobody knows that collection like Father Boyle," Peconi said. "All of our licensees love him."

But Father Boyle's puckish humor sometimes got the better of him. He told one licensee that a silver hammer with which the Pope breaks the seal on a door at St. Peter's each jubilee year was actually used to tap an ailing Pope's body to tell whether he was dead or alive. The licensee, who was Jewish, went around repeating the story until Peconi told him that Father Boyle had been joking.

Earlier this year, Peconi gave me a list indicating that she had sold more than twenty sublicenses, for a total of more than seven million dollars. According to her contract with Father Boyle, forty per cent of the proceeds go to the Vatican Library. Boyle and Peconi had also set up two shops on the library premises that were earning several hundred thousand dollars a year, according to Peconi's sales figures. The Vatican Library received half of all proceeds, after payments to licensees and operating costs. So there was reason to suppose that the Vatican Library would have more than made up the money it had lost in the court settlement. "Every penny we made can be accounted for, and these various licenses paid for the rewiring of the library, the new registration desk, the air-conditioning system, and the Barberini periodical room," Peconi told me. By shutting down Cortile del Belvedere, she pointed out, the Vatican had shut off this source of funds to the library, and had also set off a second round of litigation, which could cost millions more. The Vatican "thinks you can just take people's money, spend it, and then rip up the contracts and sell new licenses," Peconi says.

MONSIGNOR FRANCESCO SALERNO, a legal expert in the Vatican's Office of Economic Affairs, was charged with reorganizing the library's business and defenestrating Father Boyle, and was recently rewarded with a promotion to bishop for his efforts. "If you knew Vatican law, you would know that the books in the library belong to the Pope and the Holy Father alone—no one else has the right to dispose of them," he told me when we talked on the phone. But he refused to meet with me or discuss the case in detail.

Despite Salerno's position that Peconi has no valid legal rights, he did



"I think we should all be thankful that Bill Clinton never had an inappropriate relationship with Joyce Maynard."

LETTER FROM VATICAN CITY

try to reach a settlement with her. One of the sticking points was that in 1994 Father Boyle, without getting any more money from Peconi, had signed a new contract, which superseded their previous agreements and extended her control over library licensing to the year 2024, with the option for another thirty-year renewal after that. Boyle told me at the time that he had seen no reason not to renew Peconi's contract, because business was taking off and the litigation seemed to be petering out. The Vatican offered Peconi a fifteen-year contract, retroactive to 1989, which would have run its course in just six years.

The Vatican's rough treatment of Father Boyle appears to be part of a legal strategy to paint him as a rogue priest, so that the Holy See can disown the contracts he signed. "If I tried to sell you the dome of St. Peter's, would you buy it?" Salerno asked. As the Los Angeles attorney Suzelle Smith says, "That's going to be a hard sell, to say that Father Boyle didn't have the authority. After all, he organized a show with the Library of Congress, and nobody said he shouldn't do that. The stores were operating right down the corridor from the Vatican Museum." (Smith has her own reasons for taking this position: the Vatican has yet to pay her firm \$1.3 million in legal bills for the Carver litigation.)

Lost in all this controversy is the fact that Boyle succeeded, to a remarkable degree, in fulfilling his grand vision for the Vatican Library. Scholars in the newly wired, air-conditioned reading room tap along quietly at their laptop computers. His project to computerize the listings for a million and a half printed books is nearly complete. Far more than a mere catalogue, the Vatican program has a powerful search engine that is a genuine research tool. Moreover, thanks to Boyle's generosity and imagination, the library's mainframe computer is linked to all the catalogues of most of the foreign scholarly libraries in Rome.

The I.B.M. project is moving forward, although it has a long way to go. It took two years to digitize twenty thousand images, and this figure represents the contents of only about a hundred and fifty of the hundred and fifty thousand manuscripts in the library.

But even this small pilot project has provided an intriguing look at what the future may hold. A scholar can now call up a manuscript and pore over it, using the magnification powers of the computer. In 1996, to demonstrate the possibilities of the project, Boyle and I.B.M. arranged to digitize a series of illuminated musical manuscripts so that you can listen to the music as you follow the notes on the page.

Father Boyle is confident that digitization will enhance, rather than diminish, the status of actual books and libraries. He notes, for example, that the I.B.M. technicians were seduced and humbled by their contact with the Vatican's extraordinary manuscripts. Jorge Luis Borges tells the story of a barbarian who, while laying siege to Ravenna during the collapse of the Roman Empire, sees the extraordinary beauty and richness of its civilization, suddenly switches sides, and begins to defend the city from destruction. Boyle believes that the same thing will happen with the computer and the Vatican Library. When he was negotiating with an I.B.M. executive about financing the digitization project, the man from I.B.M. asked him, "What are you prepared to put up?" Father Boyle recalled. "And I said, I'm not putting up anything. I've got a hundred and fifty thousand manuscripts. That's bigger than I.B.M. any day."

When I last saw Boyle, earlier this year in Rome, he had just returned from a clinic following a bad case of bronchitis. He looked even smaller and more fragile than he had the previous summer. Nevertheless, he sees his own private misfortune within a bigger picture, about which he remains optimistic. Though he was fired and humiliated, his vision has prevailed. Many people in the Vatican who were skeptical about computerizing the library collection are impatient to get rid of Peconi and proceed with I.B.M. "The library is five hundred and fifty years old, and it will survive this, too," Boyle says. ♦

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