

Don't Be Fooled by the Window Dressing

In the 1960s, my father-in-law was looking around Leek market when he came across a costermonger selling damsons – particularly fine damsons, at that. After negotiating a price, my father-in-law said he would take a box. The stall holder bent down behind the counter. ‘No’, said my father-in-law. Pointing to the box right at the front of the stall, he went on: ‘I’ll take that one’.

I have just watched as fine an example of window dressing as anybody could wish for: ‘Inside the Vatican’, a two-part series on the BBC. We are assured by the narrator – the hallowed-toned Paul McGann (who comes from a Roman Catholic family) – that we are privileged to see the Vatican from the inside, to see it as it has never been seen before.

That may well be true. But the big question is, do we see the Vatican as it really is or do we see it as the PR experts in the Vatican want us to think it is? In other words, are we being treated to an exercise in window dressing?

You know my answer!

In this two-part series, we are shown a bevy of Vatican lesser-fry going to or doing their jobs – office workers, typists, gardeners, men engaged in recycling cardboard and cooking oil, statue-cleaners, banner hoisters, security guards, a tailor specialising in clerical vestments, and the like. We meet priest after priest processing with his retinue to take masses in various chapels; one priest is shown to be one of the lads on the football pitch. We are treated to a host of top brass, seemingly endlessly perambulating along immense, interminable and vastly-ornate corridors, parading in all their finery in set-piece display. (There appears to be an inordinate amount of walking involved in working in the Vatican). We meet Pope Francis delivering un-charismatic speech after un-charismatic speech in his bland tone, discourses often larded with

pious platitudes. He is shown to be one of the common people with his closing remark: ‘Have a good lunch!’ – which I take to mean something matey, something along the lines of: ‘Have a good day!’ One of the blokes, you see, one of us!

Oh, yes, thorny issues are raised – the paedophile scandal, in particular – but it could hardly be otherwise, could it? Even in this, however, we are reassured: the Vatican has set up a postgraduate course in child protection. And although the Pope’s speech to clergy on the subject does contain some strong sentiments, it is delivered in his usual weak way, and ends on a bright and cheery note as he wishes his hearers a Merry Christmas. This, one of his closest colleagues assures us, is a Christian message!

Let’s cut to the chase. Let’s get past the window dressing.

The Vatican we are fobbed off with is whiter than white – all one jolly family, it seems. Yes, we hear that some officials suffer some small – but minor – inconveniences, and there is some unrest over recent exposure of the sins of the clergy and papal authorities – called a ‘mistake’, by the Church – but, in truth, all is sunshine. Yes, trouble is probably just over the horizon with the next Conclave to elect the next pope after the demise of Francis, but even this is exciting, part of the papal plan!

Far more serious – of the utmost seriousness, in fact – in all our perambulations through the hallowed precincts, there is not a Bible in sight; mass books aplenty, but no Bible. Tradition, endless tradition, comes up as the basis of practice after practice, but of biblical argument to justify it, not a whisper. For all Rome’s talk about the Bible and tradition being the authority for its system, it’s as clear as noon-day that the Bible comes a very, very poor second. In fact, judging by these two programmes, the Bible has no place at all in the thinking and practice of the Vatican.

That’s not all.

Where is the authentic Vatican? Where is the real work done? Where are we let into the power-broker discussions? Where are we shown the disagreements within the curia-mafia? Where do we

meet policy being hammered out? Where is the probing of the root cause of the paedophile scandal – namely, celibacy and the culture of secrecy it engenders?

We are told the Church has always to be reforming – even though this runs absolutely counter to the Vatican boast of *semper eadem* – Rome never changes. The truth is, Rome knows how to morph, but keep its ethos constant.

We meet historical revisionism. We are assured, for instance, that Pope Francis has put the Church and paedophilia on the world's agenda. Really? I thought it was brought to the world's attention through the work of reporters such as the Spotlight group on the *Boston Globe*. As everybody knows, Rome was well-aware of what was going on in Massachusetts, successfully keeping it under wraps until the reporters did their job. Indeed, even after exposure by the *Globe*, the Boston cardinal who presided over the appalling scandal in that city was smartly moved upwards by Rome, elevated to one of the highest ranks within the Vatican itself. I admit it did not happen on Pope Francis' watch, but happen it did. Will Rome face up to it? Will they stop revising history, and admit their culpability? Francis appeals in the programme for those guilty to say '*mea culpa*'.¹ Will the Curia start the ball rolling, followed at once by the rolling of more of the heads of those responsible – the rolling of all of them?

Wouldn't be nice if we could see the Vatican in the cold light of day, not through a fog of sentiment? Not much hope of that, I'm afraid! But what else can we expect with the first Jesuit pope in charge? That fact, in itself, speaks volumes, and blows the gaffe² right from the word Go.³

True, we do meet some critics who call for reform, not one of which, however, is given much space – and even less credence.

¹ *mea culpa*: plead guilty, own up.

² 'Blows the gaffe': British slang meaning 'gives the game away'.

³ See David Gibson: 'To Understand Pope Francis, Look to the Jesuits', *National Catholic Reporter*, March 12th, 2014.

One critic regrets the present Pope's 'laxity' with his introduction of novelties, and appeals for a return to tradition; in fact, he wants a restoration of mediaeval papal-authoritarianism. It wouldn't surprise me if he really wants a return to the Inquisition.

Another critic – he makes even less of an appearance in the programme, sad to say – refers to Christ's great commission, and wants the Church to get back to the gospel. By this, he means, of course, the gospel as pedalled by traditional Romanism. But at least he argues that the Pope has no scriptural warrant to set up conferences on global warming, whereas he does have Christ's standing command to preach the gospel in all the world.

Incidentally, that last critic is raising a vital point. As I say, he was given only a tiny amount of oxygen by the BBC – a mere token amount – and nobody paid the slightest attention to what he was saying. But he does address the root issue with his guarded demand for a return to Scripture. It is the key point. If only Rome would shine the searchlight of Scripture on itself! Wishing for the moon, alas!

Coming closer to home, it is not just Rome which needs to do this. Modern evangelicals – those who are re-engineering the church, re-modelling the *ekklēsia* – they need to face Scripture too.⁴

I began this article with my father-in-law in Leek market. I have never forgotten the wise way in which he dealt with the damson seller. But, alas, I have to confess my folly: I have not always acted on what I knew. I recall how I, myself, came across a market trader selling some superb pickling-onions. I snapped up a bag! But when I got home, I found the onions I had paid good money for did not match the quality of the ones on display. The trader had gained his end. I had been duped. Indeed, I had allowed myself to be duped!

I appeal to all my readers: don't make that mistake here.

⁴ See my *Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder; New-Covenant Articles: Volume Twelve; Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*.