

Interview with Director Antonio Paolucci, who decided to open the Vatican Museums every Friday evening in September and October. He speaks about the initiative.

Nighttime Openings of the Vatican Museums

by ANGELA AMBROGETTI

It is nothing new for museums in Europe and Italy. But the Vatican Museums normally close their doors at 3 pm, and to keep them open late at night is a real innovation. It is one of the novelties introduced by Antonio Paolucci, director of the Vatican Museums. Paolucci is a world-famous art historian who came to the Vatican Museums after many years as superintendent of Florence and Mantua and as Italy's minister of culture. He says he wishes to give the museums "back to the people", according to the intention of the Popes who created them. The first evening opening in July was a success; the evening openings on Friday nights in September and October are still an experiment, and starting next summer they will be permanent. I spoke with Paolucci in his office.

You are opening the Vatican Museums at night. Are people coming?

A.P.: I have seen many families, young couples, group of friends and people from the city. The big groups of Japanese tourists are not coming. It was a form of "reconquest" of the museums, which the Popes created precisely for ordinary people.

Mr. Director, what did you

bring to the Vatican Museums from your Italian experience?

A.P.: I believe I brought here my experience of important museums in the Italian Republic, I was superintendent in Venice, Florence and Mantua and minister of Italy's cultural heritage from 1995 to 1996. As I see it, a limitation in how the Vatican Museums have been directed is a kind of "closed-in" spirit, which in some ways is typical for these places. It can only be useful to soften and open up to relationships with the exterior world, I must say that people are surprised that the Vatican bureaucracy actually works better than that of the Italian ministries. I know Italy's ministries well and I am starting to know the Vatican bureaucracy, and I must say that the Vatican system can give good results, if it is well-governed.

Is the museum a social place, a meeting place?

A.P.: I think it is a rather superficial idea that the museum is a meeting place. You meet people at a bar, at a restaurant, in the piazza, on a walk. Here you meet works of art, you meet the Belvedere Apollo, the Laocoon, Raffaello's Stanze, Michelangelo. The problem with the Vatican Museums, as with all the big museums in the world, is to make

understandable things that are extremely difficult to understand. To understand Raphael or Michelangelo is as difficult as to understand a sonnet by Shakespeare or a short story by Cervantes. People don't understand this: they see colourful figures and think that they understand. As a matter of fact, they haven't understood anything. It is extremely difficult to understand works of art and "converse" with them so that they can teach you something. I think that today, the real problem of the historic museums of the world is that in our time there is a semantic "blackout" of symbols and their meanings. For example, what is circumcision, or Hercules' twelve labours? Who was Ajax? These symbols have dominated Western civilization for 2,000 years and they are no longer perceptible. We must help people to understand symbols and to understand how artists have put these symbols into their works of art. I think that the future is in the didactics of education. The museum is necessary, and this was the view of the great Popes who created it. The Vatican Museums were made by Clement XIV, Pius VI and Pius VII, in the same years when the modern museums of Europe were created, like the

Louvre of the Historic Museums of Vienna or Berlin. These people asked themselves what the meaning of a museum is and why it was meaningful to invest a lot of money in them. The formidable educational function of a museum is to transform common people in citizens. A Pope of a head of state needs citizens, because the are more useful and more important than common people who are unpredictable and ungovernable. Citizens are the collaborations of an enlightened government. This was how they reasoned in the 18th and 19th centuries.

o **Does art history still have a place in the educational of ordinary citizens?**

A.P.: In Italy very little, in other countries not at all. I hope that art history will remain at least in the humanistic programs of the secondary school. Roberto Longhi, who was my teacher, used to say that the true language of Italians is the figurative language. Italian invented figures and music. In this, we are the first in the world: we can make figures and sing, not bad! Other people can be philosophers.

o **Are there other plans for opening up the museums?**

A.P.: It would be crazy to believe that you can know the Vatican Museums in an hour and a half, which is the time of most tours. I began to visit the Vatican Museums as a student and I have been director for two years, and yet I can only say that I don't know them! I know something, some sections, some

particular works of art. What can you say that I don't know them! I think that some think that you can understand even after just a short visit, and this is something my most reverend superiors should consider, the historic and cultural mission of the Church of Rome. Think of this "heresy" of Hebraism, the most opposed to graven images of all the Mediterranean cultures, which comes here and accepts the incredible challenge of accepting the Hellenistic Greco-Roman figurative culture. It gives the face of Phoebus Apollo to Christ, that of Hercules Invictus to Daniel among the lions, And in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Church accepted the challenge of considering visible reality as an epiphany of God, as God's shadow on earth. If they hadn't thought that, there would have been no Giovanni Bellini, Raphael, Tiziano. And then there is ethnographic museum, which shows that the Church also respects the so-called barbarian cultures. And what can we say about contemporary art with the gallery created by that great and wonderfully pessimistic Pope, Paul VI? In a hour and half you can not say these things... This is the unique and specific character of the Vatican Museums, which are always mentioned in the plural, because the Church has tried to cover all the expressions of man; man the artist, who is a creator and thus an image of God, both when he makes a canoe in Papua New Guinea and when he paints the Last Judgement. Paul VI

understood these things. He was the only truly modern Pope who was a friend of the arts. But turning back to reality, the Vatican Museums today is a company in the black, perhaps the only one in the Vatican, with 600 employees and four and a half million visitors. It earns more than it spends. this is an objective fact, and allows us to risk an evening session. **Have you consider separate entrance do different parts of the Museums, as at the Louvre?**

A.P.: No, because I fear you would lose the understanding of the plurality of the Museums. Imagine a separate entrance for the Sistine Chapel! People would go only there, because that is what they are interested in, and they would leave all the rest wonderfully empty. With my egoism as an art historian, I could be happy about that, but I don't feel is useful. Although with so many visitors, I don't know what will remain of the Sistine Chapel in two or three generations.