



Vatican Radio – Myths debunked

Seàn Patrick Lovett, Director of the English language service at Vatican Radio



Vatican Radio

Myths de

Seán Patrick Lovett
*Director of the English language
service at Vatican Radio*

Don't need to be Roman Catholic to work for Vatican Radio.



debunked



But it does help in terms of what you do and why you do it.

No, we don't only broadcast the Rosary and the Mass in Latin (although they are among the most popular of our 40 language programmes).

No, the Pope doesn't tell us what or what not to say (although we do give priority to what *he* says and does: it is, after all, "The Pope's Radio").

No, we're not even the "official mouthpiece" of either the Pope in particular or the Church in general. According to our Statute we're expected to "*get the message out as quickly as possible*" and to "*take responsibility*" (and, one presumes, the consequences) for what we say. As Vatican Radio myths go – that's just the tip of the iceberg. I should know.

I've been here for the past 28 years (one of my first tasks was to provide the radio commentary for the funeral of Pope Paul VI). And, no, I'm not a priest (although I frequently get mail addressed to Father, or even Monsignor, Seàn-Patrick Lovett). Actually out of the 400 people who work here, only 10% are religious (i.e. priests or nuns) and a quarter of the staff are women (which often comes

as something of a surprise to those who think of the Vatican as a "male-dominated institution").

On the subject of institutions, since its conception, Vatican Radio has been under the guidance and management of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). 17 of them work at the Radio and many hold key directorial posts including those of Director General (Fr Pasquale Borgomeo), Director of Programming (Fr Federico Lombardi) and Technical Director (Fr Lino Dan).

Once nicknamed "The Pope's Army" because of their fidelity to the Holy Father, the global vision and missionary spirit of the Jesuits made them the ideal choice to harness the power of what, in the 1920's, was considered the greatest scientific discovery of all time: radio waves.

Marconi

The man who made that discovery is a household name today. There isn't a town or village in Italy that doesn't have a street or a piazza named after him: Guglielmo Marconi.

Weather reports for February 12th 1931 say it was cold and windy in Rome. Marconi had to hold onto his top hat as he waited for the Pope outside the small building he himself

had designed to house the radio's transmission station on a hill inside the Vatican.

The tiny (108 acres or 43 hectares) City State was only two years old. It was one of the achievements of the 1929 Lateran Pacts which solved the so-called "Roman question", but which effectively limited the Pope's temporal power to what was little more than a walled garden behind St Peter's Basilica.

The Pope was Pius XI. As a man, he was fascinated by all things technological and scientific. As Universal Pastor, he was convinced he had to use technology to communicate beyond the confines of that small City State. Which is why he commissioned Marconi to set up the Vatican's Radio station. Its mission was to carry the Pope's voice and the "Good News of the Gospel" to the ends of the earth.

There have been other Popes (Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I and John Paul II) and new technologies (satellites, internet, digital audio...), but the mission of Vatican Radio has remained the same.

Now well into her 70s, and affectionately known as "the grandmother of radio stations", she continues to honour the opening premise of her Mission Statement:

"...to announce the Christian message with liberty, fidelity and efficacy... to defend the teachings of the Pope...to provide information about the activities of the Holy See... to echo the voice of Catholic life in the world... and to evaluate present problems in the light of the Church's teaching."

All of the above while "paying constant attention to the signs of the times". Roughly translated that means: being ready to accept change. And change it has.

From the first scientific news programmes in Latin ("*Scientiarum Nuncius Radiophonicus*"), to the multilinguistic information and entertainment programmes of today (40 languages including Latvian, Vietnamese, Swahili, Malayalam, Armenian, Tamil*...). From short wave broadcasts to satellites and the internet. From being the voice of the Catholic Church in the catacombs of

Eastern Europe (until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989), to being an alternative voice that offers clear moral guidelines, consolation, healing and hope in the overcrowded marketplace of modern-day global communications.

The travelling pontificate of John Paul II has been a decisive factor in dictating that change: another of Vatican Radio's "institutional tasks" is that of "recording and distributing all sound related to the activities of the Holy Father" both inside and outside the Vatican. It also has the duty of "protecting the rights" to the Pope's voice and of "safeguarding its pastoral character" when used by third parties. That's easier said than done in an age when pirates of the ether roam and pillage at will.

Back to mythology

No, it's not true that Vatican Radio is the most listened-to radio in the world. Even if it were, we wouldn't know. Vatican Radio has never undertaken a global audience survey: aside from the fact that such a survey would severely dent our annual



Vatican Radio antenne



Radio News Group visiting, November 2004

budget, there are serious doubts about its accuracy.

Nowadays you're more likely to hear a Vatican Radio programme being rebroadcast on your local radio station than on Vatican Radio itself. The latest figures list 1,040 rebroadcasters (58 in France alone and 363 in Latin America) in over 70 countries around the world. And those are the official numbers. They don't take into consideration the hundreds of small (diocesan, hospital, school, university and commercial) radios that download daily programming that's "free to air".

Finally, Vatican Radio has no "alternative sources of income": we don't sell advertising space or air-time and we offer our programmes for rebroadcast free of charge. We are at the service of the Holy See and somewhere on the Vatican's complex and comprehensive budget are the words: Vatican Radio.

To listen?

If you haven't already done so, a visit to our website might be worth your while: www.vaticanradio.org

But if you really enjoy debunking myths, then a visit to Vatican Radio's *One-O-Five Live* website is a must in terms of the variety of programme content offered in English (and Italian): www.105live.vaticanradio.org.

One-O-Five Live is the closest Vatican Radio could get to a face-lift. The channel is broadcast live to the Rome area on 105 FM (hence the name) and provides dynamic, interactive programming in Italian with news and information in English and French. Content can be listened to or downloaded directly from the website in MP3. A youthful staff provides a 21st century sound that's surprisingly competitive in a non-commercial way. No topic is taboo, although everything is placed in a Catholic/Christian perspective. Music plays an important part: from pop and jazz to classical and liturgical.

It almost makes you want to listen, doesn't it?

* *36 million people mostly in the State of Kerala, India, speak Malayalam.*



Father Pasquale Borgoméo



Vatican Radio studio