

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

THE HOLY SEE'S NEWEST MUSEUM

"EUNTES DOCETE OMNES GENTES..." ("GO, THEREFORE, AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS...")
(MATTHEW 28:19)

On December 9, 2010, five months ago now, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, perhaps better known by its former title, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith or simply as *Propaganda Fide*, opened a new Missionary Museum. It's located in part of the Congregation's mastodonic headquarters active since the mid-1600s, on the edge of Rome's fashionable and pricey Piazza di Spagna shopping district. This impressive building is a work of art in itself, begun by the architect and sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini, who lived across the street, in 1643, and completed by his arch-rival, the architect Francesco Borromini, in 1664.

The brainchild of His Eminence Ivan Cardinal Dias of Mumbai, India, prefect of the Congregation since 2006, and of Professor Francesco Buranelli, this new museum, which took several years to assemble, was presented to the press by Father Massimo Cenci, P.I.M.E. (the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions), undersecretary of the Congregation; Professor Buranelli; and Italy's career Ambassador Ludovico Ortona, president of the Italian Art and Culture Development Group (ARCUS). At the inauguration, Father Cenci pointed out that this new museum "has artistic value but... was conceived and created... above all with a view to its specifically pastoral function."

Its contents emphasize the Church's commitment to evangelization throughout history and even today: in short, *Euntes docete omnes gentes...* (Matthew 28:19).

During my exclusive tour for *Inside the Vatican*, guided by Professor Buranelli, he said, "Pope Gregory XV (1621-3), with his bull *Inscrutabili Divinae*, founded the Holy Congregation 'de Propaganda Fide' in 1622, for two reasons. He wanted to bring the Gospel and spread Christianity to those newly-discovered areas of the globe where the Christian message had still not arrived. Thus, *Propaganda Fide* was to promote and coordinate all evangelizing activity in non-Christian lands. But secondly, he wanted to defend the faith, particularly in northern Europe, where heresy had questioned its genuineness."

To achieve these aims, in 1627, Gregory XV's successor, Urban VIII (1623-44), best-known as patron of Bernini, with the strong support of his pious younger



brother, Antonio Marcello Barberini, a Capuchin monk before being elevated by his brother to cardinal (1624) and prefect of the Congregation (1632-45), set up a seminary here, known as the *Collegium Urbanum*, to train missionaries.

Under the personal guidance of Antonio Barberini, who left all his abundant worldly possessions to *Propaganda Fide* at his death in 1646, the *collegium's* first 25 graduates studied here between 1637 and 1639; the *collegium* remained active through the 19th century. Since 1926, when it was renamed the *Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana*, its ever-expanding campus — with nearly 1,500 international seminarians today — has been housed on the Janiculum Hill next door to the Pontifical North American College.

Over the centuries the graduates of the *Collegium Urbanum* have been dispatched to the farthest corners of the world to evangelize and to form local clergy, some of whom then came to Rome to study and create new dioceses, often with indigenous priests and bishops. At the behest of Gregory XV, they were taught "not to reject anything that was good, pure, and saintly in the indigenous cultures and religions when it serves God."

In addition to the formation of missionaries and thus their spreading of the faith by word of mouth, from its inception the Congregation has operated a polyglot printing press, at first the only one in Rome with oriental fonts; it printed catechisms in many languages, for besides word of mouth, the written word was essential to evangelization.

Therefore, because of the importance of its "mission" and the extraordinary extent of its authority and of the territory under its jurisdiction, the Congregation's cardinal prefect used to be known as the "Red Pope."

A globe at the center of the museum's first of several rooms — "a symbol of the universality of the Church and the diffusion of Christianity from Rome worldwide," Buranelli commented — projects a video about the origins, the history and the activities of *Propaganda Fide*. "Christ gave the Apostles this mission," Buranelli continued. "*Propaganda Fide* is the institution that carries out the mission that Jesus Christ gave to the Apostles."



Top, *Euntes in Mundum Universum Praedicate Evangelium* by Gaetano Lapis. Above left, Cardinal Ivan Dias, prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples; right, Professor Francesco Buranelli (Galazka Photos)



THE MISSIONARY MUSEUM OF PROPAGANDA FIDE is open Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 2:30 PM to 6 PM. Entrance fee: 8 Euros for adults, 6 Euros for children and retirees, and 4 Euros for groups. A 40-minute audio-guide included in the entrance fee is available in Italian, English, Spanish, French, and Russian.



Left and right, missionary photographs from the archives of *Agenzia Fides*.

Below, the Ugandan memorial and the Renaissance-style canvas painted and signed in 1793 by Canova to prove that he could paint (Galazka photos)



The walls of the second room, also multi-media, are decorated with world maps.

On monitors inserted into each “continent,” plus separate ones for China and for Japan, are shown ever-changing photographs, never before displayed, slideshows of the some 10,000 images from the recently-cataloged archives of *Agenzia Fides*. They illustrate the daily life, schools, crafts, agriculture, food, and dress of the “missions” and of their priests and parishioners from the beginning of photography, but mostly at the beginning of the 20th century.

The third room or *Sala Borgia* displays images on a monitor of artifacts from all over the world which had been collected by the extremely cultured, amiable, and open-minded Cardinal Stefano Borgia (1731-1804), a star of the Catholic Enlightenment and founder of the literary society known as *L'Accademia Volscia*, who in his last years was first secretary and then prefect of the Congregation. A kind of prototype of this Missionary Museum, Borgia's collection of ancient and medieval art and religious objects (in particular Coptic manuscripts), not all of which are Christian or Catholic, was famous throughout Europe in his lifetime and mentioned by Goethe in his *Italian Voyages*. “Although they were originally all housed here, to reassemble Borgia's ancient Egyptian, Hindu, Buddhist, Persian, Pre-Columbian, Aztec, and Christian treasures,” Buranelli told me, “would have been a ‘mission impossible’ as they’ve been dispersed among the Vatican Museums’ Ethnological Missionary Museum, the Vatican Library, Rome’s Luigi Pigorini Pre-historic and Ethnographic Museum, and the Capodimonte Museum in Naples.”

From here Professor Buranelli took me into the heart of the *collegium*, its recently-restored book-lined Barberini library with portraits of its most illustrious students, including recently-beatified Cardinal Newman, below its wooden-coffered ceiling.

On display here are several unique documents: a thank-you note (1637) in Arabic to Pope Urban VIII from Mattias, the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria; a letter dated 1658 from Emperor Leopold I of Austria (1640-1705) to Abbas II (1642-1667), Shah of Persia, asking him to repeal laws restricting the religious freedom of Christians there; a letter (1661) from St. James, the *Catholicos* in



Ejmiastin, explaining to Pope Alexander VII the difficulties his faithful had to confront to practice their faith in the Turkish Empire; a protest letter (1687) from a group of Armenian bishops and pilgrims about being robbed and abandoned naked by some pirates from Leghorn; a letter written in Chinese, Tartar and Latin (1716) complete with the Chinese emperor's seal — “an early ecumenical document,” remarked Buranelli — from Christian missionaries in China asking Pope Clement XI to make a decision about the “annoying” problem of “Chinese Rites” or what traditional rites those Chinese newly converted to Christianity could still practice; and a table of typographical characters of all the letters in the alphabets of the 22 languages that, starting in 1627, *Propaganda Fide's* polyglot press used to publish the Gospels for Asia.

Back on the museum's ring-shaped route, in a fourth room, is a startling memorial of elephant tusks, each inscribed with the name of one of the 22 Ugandan martyrs, beheaded or burned to death by local King Mwanga between 1885 and 1887. This sobering testament to the high price missionaries have often paid to spread the Word of God stands beside a video screen showing footage of Pope Paul VI's 1969 trip to Africa when he received this tribute from Uganda's president.

Across the hall is a long gallery lined with 17th- and 18th-century paintings, its highlights being a unique painting by the famous sculptor Canova, two landscapes of the *Roman Countryside* by Jan Frans Van Bloemen, a *Pentecost* by Corrado Giaquinto, and a *St. George* by Guercino. A door, just before reaching Buranelli's favorite, a canvas by Salvator Rosa of *Noah's Ark During the Great Flood*, opens onto a tiny low-ceilinged chapel where Blessed John Henry Newman celebrated his first Mass after his ordination; the others lead to former classrooms, now off-limits offices which still today administer the Church's missions worldwide.

The museum's itinerary ends downstairs in another chapel, an architectural masterpiece by Borromini purposely, at the desire of Cardinal Barberini, dedicated to the Epiphany. Newman was ordained here.

“This is the only church in Rome dedicated to the *Re Magi*,” Buranelli pointed out. “These three pagan kings were the first converts to Christianity. What then could be a more appropriate theme for a chapel in a seminary for future Christian missionaries?” ○