

Vatican explored

Gerri Pare/CNS

NEW YORK — A National Geographic special explores a locale of particular interest to Catholics in "Inside the Vatican," to be rerun Tuesday, Oct. 29, 10-11 p.m. EST on PBS (check local listings). The "inside" of the program's title refers more to geography than to any startling revelations about the inner workings of the Vatican.

Respectfully narrated by Martin Sheen, the documentary is book-ended by preparations for, and actual footage from, a major ritual in St. Peter's Basilica: the ordination ceremony of nine new bishops. Pope John Paul II officiates in the basilica with numerous cardinals participating as well.

Both the world's smallest sovereign nation and the headquarters of the world's largest religious body, the Vatican has a population under 1,000, 100 of whom comprise the Swiss Guards, the world's smallest standing army. And they are all Swiss, Catholic and at least 5-foot-8 in height. Unlike most "security guards," they take an oath to serve and protect the pope.

The program puts a human face on the state within a city by follow-

ing veteran Vatican photographer Arturo Mari around as he captures images of the pontiff at work, meeting both the humble and the exalted from around the globe. The photographer is most impressed by how the frail pontiff does not hesitate to physically embrace and kiss lepers in Korea. Mari describes the Holy Father's life as work and prayer and says that "free time does not exist for the pope."

St. Peter's got its start when the emperor Constantine ordered a cathedral be built directly over the grave of Peter some three centuries after he was martyred in Rome in 64 A.D. In 1929, the Vatican became a separate state, although entirely surrounded by Rome. Within the Vatican walls are some of the world's greatest art treasures — as well as a soup kitchen.

The script takes note of how popes have been the greatest supporters of culture through the centuries, and one segment of the program visits art restorers who maintain the glorious paintings, sculptures and fine tapestries that comprise the Vatican collection. A Franciscan sister is seen cheerfully engaging in the painstaking removal of worn thread from a tapes-



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

St. Peter's Basilica is visited in the documentary "Inside the Vatican."

try, to be replaced by one of the 6,000 different shades of thread at her disposal.

Mentioned in passing are a few less-than-saintly popes, and how Pope Julius II's handling of indulgences eventually led to the Reformation. However, credit is given to Pope John Paul for his pivotal role in the fall of communism, and a quite interesting segment explains how Pope Gregory XIII literally altered time in 1580, with the result that most of the world now uses the Gregorian calendar.

Factual and informative, the program does not dig deeply, but does present some exquisite visuals of the Holy See's extraordinary architecture as well as interiors of St. Peter's, the Apostolic Palace and the Vatican Library. The documentary should prove of interest not only to Catholics but to those who have not had the opportunity to visit the Eternal City.

Pare is director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for Film and Broadcasting.

Jefferson documentary to air

Henry Herx/CNS

NEW YORK — The life, the era and the political philosophy of one of our nation's founders are explored in the two-part documentary "Thomas Jefferson," which will be rerun Monday, Oct. 28, and Monday, Nov. 4, 9-10:30 p.m. EST each night on PBS (check local listings).

After his mammoth series "The Civil War" and "Baseball," filmmaker Ken Burns has turned his attention to a single individual whose historical importance and personal accomplishments merit such extensive scrutiny.

As viewers will come to appreciate, Jefferson was a giant among his contemporaries and his legacy to the republic so fundamental that three hours is barely sufficient time to deal with the subject.

Part history, part personal portrait, the documentary succeeds in showing how Jefferson viewed himself as well as how others saw him then and how historians perceive him today.

Viewers who know him only as the framer of the Declaration of Independence and the president who initiated the Louisiana Purchase will meet a brilliant but troubled

personality whose life was full of contradictions.

Jefferson was a child of the Enlightenment, optimistic about the potential of the human spirit and the promise of the American future.

Yet for all his ideals of human equality, Jefferson was a slave owner who condemned slavery in theory but never emancipated those he owned.

The program gives balanced treatment to the question of Jefferson's relations with Sally Hemings, one of his slaves, concluding there is insufficient evidence of miscegenation though it was a common practice of the time.

During the course of the documentary, actor Ossie Davis reads an eloquent narrative written by Geoffrey C. Ward, while numerous historians provide their own insights.

The result is a well-crafted, beautifully illustrated guide to a complex historical figure whose republican ideals remain at the heart of our democratic institutions.

Herx is retired director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for Film and Broadcasting.

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