

## Sell the Vatican. Feed the world?

Kate Childs Graham | Nov. 5, 2009

A few weeks ago, a video by comedian Sarah Silverman went viral. Well over 600,000 people viewed the official YouTube video and countless others viewed the video via Facebook and other sites.

The subject of this viral video? The Vatican. And world hunger.

In the video, Sarah suggests that the solution to ending world hunger could be to sell the Vatican.

A quick warning before I direct you to YouTube: parts of the video are, well, rather uncouth. So, keep that in mind when you click [here](#) [1] to view the whole deal.

Once I got past some of the more shocking lines of Silverman's video, it raised a few questions for me. What does it mean for the Vatican to be worth so much while preaching to live humbly? While others can barely scrape by? Even while the Vatican itself fights for an end to world hunger?

So, I googled how much the Vatican is worth. No one seems to know, but estimates are around a billion dollars (that just includes liquid assets, not priceless works of art or land). Certainly, that is much less than the \$500 billion price tag Silverman suggests; however, it is still a substantial chunk of change.

Then, I googled how much it would cost to end world hunger. Again, the estimates varied, but it would probably be around \$30 billion a year.

Based on numbers alone, it seems that selling the Vatican wouldn't cut it in terms of ending world hunger.

However, I still think Silverman may have a point. She states, "You preach to live humbly and I totally agree; so, now maybe it's time for you to move out of your house that is a city."

It's no secret that the Vatican is about flash. The pope and cardinals are almost always decked out in the finest gold-trimmed clothing. The events at the Vatican are extravagant. The properties are lavish and meticulously maintained. And, as we have sadly learned as a result of the sexual abuse crisis, there is plenty of hush money to go around.

When I think about living humbly, this isn't exactly what I imagine.

While at Catholic University, I attended daily Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Catholic groups around the United States and the world donated money to build most of the chapels in the Basilica, so the money wasn't coming directly from the Vatican's pocket. Even so, many times during Mass, with the colossal, angry-looking mosaic of Jesus staring down at me, I would think: what else could this money have been used for? Supplying soup kitchens with food for years? Sending a billion condoms to Africa? Building antiracism teams in every parish?

Yet, on the other hand, I am grateful that we have these works of art in our Catholic tradition. Certainly, I was

as awestruck as the next person when I first saw the Sistine Chapel or St. Peter's Basilica. I admit that my awe wavers when it comes to fancy clothing and shoes.

So, what would the hierarchy think about Silverman's video? *NCR* senior correspondent John Allen posed the question to Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria just as the video was gaining popularity on the web.

Here's part of what the Archbishop had to say:

"If [the comedian] is from Europe or America, I can suggest a few other things that they could sell to help the poor ... But if any person from our own poor countries were to say such a thing, and I hardly see that happening ... the few poor people who come here have never said, 'Oh, why don't they sell this and give us money for food?' They always say, 'What a beautiful place.' ... It helps them to see how great our God is, and they're not expecting the Vatican to sell it off. Anyway, to whom? Who would buy it, and what would it cost? The joke [from the comedian] isn't only offensive and in bad taste, it's stupid."

He goes on to say, "What they should be asking is, what is the Vatican doing about poverty in the world?"

On this last point, the archbishop is surely onto something. There can be no doubt about the great work the Vatican is doing to alleviate poverty in the world.

Still, don't we need to be the change we want to see? But then, I have to be honest with myself: I don't want to sell my house or give up my iPhone to feed the world. Maybe if I owned the Pieta I'd feel differently ?

In the end, I guess I would advise against selling the Vatican to feed the world, but maybe it is time for some reprioritizing. After all, the pope and cardinals should have to make the same choices we all make: Do I really *need* \$800 Prada shoes or should I give that money to someone who needs it?

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