

Marienplatz no longer about the Virgin Mary

Thomas C. Fox | Mar. 21, 2010



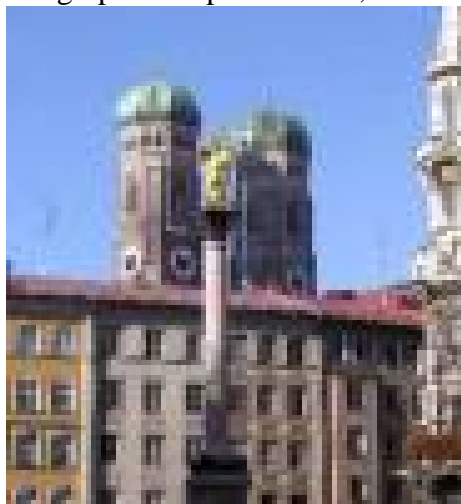
Marienplatz

Munich, Germany

Marienplatz is a square at the heart of Munich. Day and night it is packed, mostly with the young who come to hang out, to see and to be seen. There is also a lot of political theater going on in the square, speeches and leafleting. Amnesty International is recruiting new members. The Munich police maintain a presence.

This is a square of contrasts, modern life in a face-lifted Middle Age setting. Today Marienplatz is dotted by high fashion boutique and clothing shops, coffee parlors and underground Bavarian restaurants. All underground transportation passes through this plaza.

Centuries back the square was renamed after the Virgin Mary (its original name was Schramm) in an effort to protect Munich from a cholera epidemic. A statue of Mary holding the child Jesus continues to rest atop a pillar at the center of the square. A plaque there commemorates a visit by Pope John Paul II early in his pontificate. On Saturday evening, under light rain, a couple dozen people, mostly elderly, said the rosary for more than a half hour before a makeshift photograph of Pope Benedict, their former archbishop. But the general sense here



is more secular than religious.

The twin towers of the Munich cathedral are visible in the distance, but they are hardly imposing. There is one

church, the oldest in Munich, St. Peter's, on the plaza. Curiously, it features the traditional Catholic rite. A priest, distant at the head of the nave, said mass with his back to the congregation. So much for showcasing Vatican II in Munich. It seems as if the archbishop here wants to send out other signals, as if pulling backward, not moving forward, is the answer to church woes.

Munich is a wealthy city. The women here dress fashionably, high skirts, tight leggings and tall boots. The men seem trim as well. The city is clean; the people appear purposeful. On the surface, at least, people appear comfortable, and the role religion plays in their lives seems questionable.

News of the church sex scandal is ubiquitous. It is shocking and yet old news. If something new has emerged it is the undeniable knowledge that the Catholic clergy sex abuse scandal is global. Every nation with a free press and independent court system is reporting the phenomenon. This made Pope Benedict's remarks to the Irish church seem to some, while sincere, too little and too late. It is as if the Vatican, trying as it might, cannot keep up with the fast moving story. Talk about a church that changes slowly over centuries no longer seems to be working in its leaders' favor.

"Sad about the sex abuse crisis?" I asked one woman leaving a local church. "No, angry!?" she snapped back. She kept walking and did not elaborate. But anger might not be the predominant mood here.

It is difficult for any outsider to gauge the mood of people in a foreign country. And generalizations are dangerous. Nevertheless, after a few days here I sense the attitude toward the Catholic church is more one of indifference than anger. Reasons to disregard the faith, if anything, are being confirmed by the scandal. If clergy abuse is shaping attitudes, it is simply giving more people more reason to disregard the church or walk away. After all, there is a lot of life in Marienplatz, lots of energy and movement, lots of things to do, and that world appears much apart from the church that once shaped the plaza.

Wise prelates ought to know that once anger subsides and moves to indifference any apologies or promises for reform will fall on deaf ears.

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