

Farewell to arms: Former papal militia serves church with new mission

VATICAN CITY – A small cadre of men wearing sleek, dark blue suits and red ties with thin, yellow stripes keep their eyes on pilgrims streaming through St. Peter's Basilica. The men, who help maintain order and decorum in the basilica, especially during papal ceremonies, are local volunteers for a charitable organization whose history is rooted in the papal army.

In fact, it may be the only case in history in which a group dedicated to service and charity was born out of a civilian militia, said Calvino Gasparini, president of the Association of Sts. Peter and Paul.

"I believe no army in the world has undergone such a radical change of this kind," he said in an interview with the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, in late August.

Walkie-talkies and smart suits decorated with a red and gold metal badge imprinted with the Italian word, "Vigilanza," or "Security," have replaced military uniforms, tall black bearskin hats and Remington muskets topped with bayonets.

The lay association was born out of the pope's Palatine guard, one of a number of papal security forces that included the noble guard, the papal gendarmes, and the Swiss Guards.

Pope Pius IX merged two pre-existing civilian militias and formed the Palatine guard in 1850. The new corps was made up of qualified Roman Catholics who wished to show their "unconditional fidelity" to the apostolic see, according to the group's website.

The first corps of 160 men acted as an honorary guard for certain ceremonies. They worked in concert with the other corps, guarding the pope and entrances to papal buildings and territories.

During World War II, the Palatine guard took on an interesting mission when Pope Pius XI strategized “an act of genius,” Gasparini told Catholic News Service. The pope got permission from Italian authorities to expand the Palatine guard so that the Vatican could beef up its own security during the throes of wartime.

The Vatican then enlisted more than 1,000 men from the Roman population who would have been targeted by the Nazis and Italian fascists.

By letting potential political prisoners become members of the papal guard, the Vatican gave them authorized access to the Holy See’s many extraterritorial safe havens so they could find refuge and avoid being captured, killed or sent to concentration camps, Gasparini said.

They blended in perfectly with the real guardsmen, he said, because Palatine guards were not Vatican residents, but had regular homes, jobs and families.

While the guards were in no position to confront the German occupiers, they did courageously come to the aid of war victims as the Germans retreated and the Allies advanced, he said.

One hundred years after the unification of Italy, Pope Paul VI recognized there was little reason to maintain a papal army. He was not only simplifying security, he wanted to replace showy, military might with genuine evangelical simplicity.

In 1970, Pope Paul dissolved all the armed corps except the ancient Swiss Guards and created a “watch corps,” known today as the gendarmes.

However, the Palatine guard had been so exemplary in its dedication and Christian faith that the pope allowed it to continue its service as an unarmed group. It was a unique way to let the disbanded guards continue their 120-year-old legacy of fidelity and obedience to the church by giving them a new outlet for offering Christian witness.

Thus the Association of Sts. Peter and Paul was born, becoming the first and only pontifically instituted volunteer association, Gasparini said.

The men laid down their weaponry and took up the fight against poverty and the

needs of Rome and beyond.

They work with two Vatican institutions: the Vatican soup kitchen run by the Missionaries of Charity and the Vatican-based pediatric medical clinic run by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.

The Palatine guard had its own medical division to treat people wounded in battle, but today the association's medics donate their time and expertise to the pediatric hospital and to any pilgrims in need of assistance during papal ceremonies, he said.

They also raise funds for a variety of initiatives, such as African seminarian studies and a formation house for the Archdiocese of Ranchi, India.

A small team of men keep watch daily near some of the papal tombs in St. Peter's Basilica and many act as ushers during papal ceremonies.

Gasparini said that of the 500 original guards who joined the Association of Sts. Peter and Paul in 1970, 200 are still alive and active members.

Gasparini, a geophysicist for the Rome-based National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology, said he became a member of the guard in 1962 when he was 17.

They get many requests for new members, but they accept only 20 people a year. New recruits must be between 18 and 40 years old and complete the organization's two-year course in Christian and cultural formation.

Because of its older military origins, the association's statutes do not take into account allowing for female members, and Gasparini said "we want to change this."

Three women who have close ties to the association have honorary membership cards, but he said they want women to be able to become full active members.

He said, as the association's president, he will bring up the issue when he meets with Pope Benedict XVI and the secretary of state next year in June.

"Our 40th anniversary is next year and I will ask the pope if he will accept this change" and allow women to serve, he said.