

Prime meridian in Vatican Gardens

VATICAN CITY - Although the Global Positioning System has made meridians obsolete in mapmaking, a group of geographers used the GPS to mark the exact spot where the old prime meridian of Italy passed through the Vatican.

Standing at the end of a technologically guaranteed straight line of flower pots, the geographers and Vatican officials dedicated a plaque marking the spot in the Vatican Gardens Feb. 23.

A prime meridian is an arbitrarily determined line running around the globe from north to south; it is used to determine longitude as well as time zones. Although an international agreement was reached in 1880 recognizing the meridian in Greenwich, England, as the prime meridian, Italian government maps continued to use the Italian prime until the 1940s.

In 2004, a group of Italian geographers and historians began a project to commemorate the Italian meridian by marking it in the Vatican Gardens and in several parks around Rome.

At the brief Vatican ceremony, Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo, head of the office governing Vatican City State, told the scholars, "Forgive me if I end by preaching, but I am just a priest and not a scientist."

The meridian may be obsolete, he said, but everyone needs a point of reference for his or her life's journey.

In Jesus, he said, "we have a star from which we can determine our meridian with certainty for a safe voyage."