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A festival of religious-themed cultural offerings



"St. Francis - The Piazza" by Benton Spruance is in "Woodmere Welcomes Pope Francis: Biblical Art from the Permanent

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As Philadelphia prepares to welcome Pope Francis this week, its museums and cultural institutions are offering visitors' opportunities to engage with religion - and, sometimes, not just one.

On view, not surprisingly, are historical documents of the Catholic Church and treasures from the Vatican. But Dead Sea Scroll fragments, an ancient illuminated Quran, a Sumerian tablet, and George Washington's assurances to the Jews of Rhode Island also are out there.

And should you choose to get smarter at home, there's the latest of Sam Katz's city-centric documentaries, *Urban Trinity: The Story of Catholic Philadelphia*, to be broadcast over the course of the week on 6ABC.

In three parts, Katz's History Making Productions 78-minute film describes the suspicion and sometimes violent prejudice that early Catholic immigrants faced in a Protestant-dominated Philadelphia, the phenomenal growth of church membership and influence from the mid-19th to mid-20th century, and the changes and challenges of the post-war era.

Says Katz, "We planned this production schedule to deliver an iconic story about American Catholicism in one of the nation's most Catholic cities to be seen at a moment when the world's eyes would be on Pope Francis and Philadelphia. Our timing was not coincidental."

The first two parts will be shown at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, Sept. 22, the last at midnight next Sunday night, Sept. 27, a few hours after the pope's departure.

Between now and then, there's plenty to take advantage of across the city, and enthusiasm among cultural leaders.

"For us, I think this will be a great moment for Philadelphia and we're really excited about it," said Larry Dubinski, head of the Franklin Institute, where the lavish "Vatican Splendors" just opened.

That one is an import, but many of the shows feature rare and highly unusual artifacts and documents drawn from the collections of local institutions - samplings of what Sandy Horrocks, a vice president of the Free Library, calls "a city of hidden gems."

The Vatican has arranged an exhibition at the Convention Center during the week of the World Meeting of Families. "Verbum Domini II: God's Word Goes Out to the Nations" will be on display Monday through Saturday.

First shown at the Vatican, it consists of more than 80 artifacts from the Museum of the Bible, a \$400 million structure now going up near the Mall in Washington. The museum will house the 40,000-object private collection of Steve Green, president of Hobby Lobby, well-known for his evangelical activities.

The artifacts lent for the Philadelphia show include fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls; pages from the nearly 2,000-year-old Bodmer Psalms Codex; and a copy of the 1685 Eliot Indian Bible, a second edition of the first Bible printed in North America.

The Eliot Bible will also be featured in the Free Library show of rare religious texts, through Jan. 30. The library notes that its edition - the first - is the first Bible printed in North America - in Algonquin, in 1663.

The library is also displaying Martin Luther's first German New Testament, printed in Wittenburg in 1522, and the first Quran translated into English - the Alcoran of Mahomet - printed in London in 1649.

The Rosenbach Museum and Library's "Catholics in the New World: A Selection of 16th-18th Century Texts," through Jan. 31, features some of the earliest Catholic works from the Americas, including the 1544 Doctrina Breve, the oldest surviving book printed in the Western Hemisphere, and the 1584 Doctrina Christiana, the oldest published in South America.

The Franklin Institute's "Vatican Splendors," which runs to Feb. 15, contains 200 objects illustrative of the church and its historical and spiritual history. Many have never before left Vatican City.

"Religious Liberty and the Founding of America," at the National Constitution Center through Jan. 3, focuses on religious liberty in the colonies and the Constitution and the legacy of religious liberty. The materials on display, all lent for this show, include a 1741 Benjamin Franklin printing of Pennsylvania's Charter of Privileges, and writings by George Mason and Thomas Jefferson.

The National Constitution Center is also hosting a panel debate, "American Faith - The Origin and Meaning of Religious Liberty," on Monday, Sept. 21, at 5 p.m.

From Tuesday to Oct. 4, the National Museum of American Jewish History will exhibit its original 1790 letter from George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, R.I., which proclaims that the government "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." Exhibited alongside will be another letter Washington wrote to the Catholic community, assuring its rights as citizens.

The Woodmere Art Museum in Chestnut Hill has mounted "Woodmere Welcomes Pope Francis: Biblical Art from the Permanent Collection," through Oct. 18. The show features works by regional artists Benton Spruance, Walter Stuempfig, and many others.

Perhaps the most contemporary show is "Pope Up," an exhibit of 2D and 3D sculptures and paintings, photographs, video, and other media at Frankford's Globe Dye Works, 4500 Worth St. The show, featuring pieces by sculptor Virginia Maksymowicz, Holly Smith, and many others, is open every weekend in September.