

## Vatican Swiss Guard

### Overview

Not many of the visitors to Rome, who pose for a photograph in front of the Swiss soldiers on guard at the gates of Vatican City, are familiar with the history of these troops who take an oath of loyalty to the Pope. To know more we must go back to the period of the Renaissance and discover the motives that in 1506 caused Pope Julius II to invite to Rome the Helvetian soldiers, renowned for their courage, noble sentiments and loyalty.

### The History

In those times - to be a mercenary soldier was a commonplace occupation - there lived a people of warriors in the very heart of the Alps. These first Swiss Cantons had about 500,000 inhabitants of an overpopulated country. Due to the poor economic conditions of the times, there was considerable poverty.



There were few choices but to emigrate and one of the most profitable jobs was that of a mercenary soldier abroad.

There were some 15,000 men available for this type of work which was "organized" and controlled by the small "*Confederation of Cantons*". The Confederation authorized the enlistment of the men who in return received corn, salt, or other commercial goods. The men themselves regarded this "occupation" as a temporary period of summer emigration. They took part in brief but glorious wars and then returned home with the "pay" and the booty to spend the winter – until the next time!

### The first Vatican Swiss Guards

January 22nd, 1506, is the official date of birth for the *Pontifical Swiss Guard*. On that day a group of one hundred and fifty Swiss soldiers commanded by Captain Kaspavon Silenen passed through the Vatican *Porta del Popolo* and entered the Vatican for the first time, where they were blessed by Pope Julius II.

The uniforms of the Swiss Guard have evolved over the years. It is likely that the first Swiss Guards may have worn the typical dress of the military and warriors of the times. However, uniformity of the Swiss Guard's dress and arms only came about in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Guard's every-day uniform is completely blue. With the passing centuries there have been a few minor changes, but on the whole the original dress has been maintained. It is commonly thought that the uniform was designed by Michelangelo, but he had nothing to do with it. However, Raffaello – who was a student of Michelangelo - certainly did influence its development, as he influenced fashion in general in Italy during the Renaissance, through his paintings.

It is due to Commandant Jules Repond (1910-1921), that the Swiss Guards wear such fine dress today. He was gifted with a fine taste for colors and shapes. The colors which make the uniform so attractive are the traditional blue, red and yellow, accented by the white of the collar and gloves.

The duties of the Swiss Guard are both ceremonial and functional – as they also guard the Pope. You may not recognize some of them in their role of protecting the Pope – but they are there – and typically serve for a lifetime as a Swiss Guard.