

LOVE & SEX

# I Gave Up My Freedom for Love

Why would a nonreligious PR maven and fashion lover from Australia choose to live behind the walls of Vatican City, where she has to make a home in communal barracks—and even follow a dress code?

Joanne Bergamin shares her very old-fashioned love story with Abby Haglage



**T**he first time I laid eyes on Rome, I knew I had to live there. I was 10 years old, tagging along with my parents on a trip to buy gold for their jewelry shop back home in Australia's Gold Coast. I loved the feel of the city, the energy, the people.

I adored how the language rolled off their tongues, and how they encouraged me to say hello in Italian. When I returned to normal life in Australia, Rome stayed with me as I went through school and university and started a career.

When I was three years into a job working in public relations for a billion-dollar gas and oil company, it just hit me. I was a grown woman, with tons of friends, a great family, and a dog I adored, but I had a realization: *If I want to live in Italy, it's now or never.* So I quit my job, said good-bye to my childhood friends, another one in German, and a master's in business administration, but the subject seemed like a welcome departure from my fast-paced fashion job.

Through a stroke of luck, I got hired at Prada as a sales assistant for the summer. In order to get a student visa so I could stay in Italy, I started studying theology at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas. I already had a bachelor's degree in communications, another one in German, and a master's in business administration, but the subject seemed like a welcome departure from my fast-paced fashion job.

No one was more surprised to hear what I was doing than my friends back home. I'd grown up Anglican and had always been the naughty girl in religious-studies classes, making fun of the priest and doing my homework for other classes when I should have been paying attention. But living in Rome and learning more about God, I became enchanted with Catholicism. The stories of the saints, and their dedication to helping others, blew me away. It was all so beautiful. Without hesitation, I dove in, taking classes to convert, going to mass every Sunday, and wearing a diamond crucifix around my neck. A week before I was received into the Catholic Church, I began working at *L'Osservatore Romano*, the pope's newspaper. You can re-create yourself in a place like Rome, and that's what I did.

It was on my way to work that I first saw Dominic in his red, yellow, and blue uniform, standing tall and stoic in front of St. Anne's Gate, as Swiss Guards have been doing since the 1500s. While certain posts in Vatican City prohibit the guards from talking to anyone—or even moving—for hours at a time, those stationed at St. Anne's Gate are free to interact with the public. Dominic would always say good morning and ask how I was each day. He was sweet and kind, but remained professional.

Slowly, we built a friendship. He would help me get tickets to Vatican events, and tell me jokes to cheer me up on tough days. Eventually we connected on Facebook, where we chatted intermittently and I learned more about his life. As a member of the Swiss Guard, he was essentially a personal bodyguard, trained in hand-to-hand combat and committed to keeping the pope safe at any cost. With a modest salary and highly regimented lifestyle, his position was more of a vocation than a job. He and the other guards—all at least 5'8" and between the ages of 19 and 30—lived together in barracks near the pope's apartment.

One night, a few years after we had met, when neither of us had dinner plans, we decided to meet up at a little Sardinian place. Our connection that night felt magical, and we talked until the restaurant closed. Although the guards don't have a curfew, they are banned from sleeping outside Vatican City, so the evening ended abruptly when we realized it was getting late and he needed to return. Desperate to see each other again, we planned to get coffee together the next morning. In the Italian way, I was very late and nearly knocked him over running around a corner on my way to our coffee date. Instead of being annoyed, he reached out and gave me a hug. I felt overwhelmed with





Joanne Bergamin and her real-life knight in shining armor

love. That one hug changed the course of my life.

We quickly began dating, and it was like getting into a relationship with someone I already knew. Two days after the hug, he kissed me. The next day, he said, "I love you." Unbeknownst to me, Dominic had been trying to take me out for years. He told me there had been times when he'd see me coming to the gate and get too nervous to speak, so he'd run to another guard and make that one take his spot. After just a few months, we both knew we wanted to get married. But that's when reality set in: We weren't just another couple in Rome; our journey would be different.

Guards who decide to marry must agree to three additional years of service, and Dominic and I discussed the commitments we would have to make. He explained that I would have to move into Vatican City and live with him in the family barracks of the

Swiss Guard. Obviously, I would agree to follow the dress code I was already familiar with as a Vatican employee (knees and shoulders always covered) and accept that he works eight or nine days out of 10, is rarely off on weekends, and is busy every religious holiday. Most of all, I would need to understand that, as a Swiss Guard, his number-one priority would always be Pope Francis, not me.

It was a tough decision to make, one that we talked about in great detail. But we both considered his post such an honor that we decided to make the commitment for at least a few more years. Once I agreed, permission was sought within the Vatican to marry, and security and background checks ensued. Because I had previously worked in the Vatican, I wasn't worried. Still, it's not every day that an engagement is followed by an investigation into your past. While we waited for official permission, it was difficult not to tell anyone that we were engaged when really we wanted to shout it from the rooftops.

In a way, the vetting process felt like an old-fashioned courtship, and when our wedding day arrived, all the traditional pomp and circumstance around it seemed appropriate. We were married in front of 120 guests on November 1, 2014, at St. Stephen of the Abyssinians, the oldest standing church in Vatican City. Outside its doors, Dominic's fellow guards formed two lines in their colorful striped uniforms to honor us, thrusting their swords toward the sky in celebration. Right after our wedding, we got to meet with Pope Francis, who gave us some invaluable marriage advice.

Life in this 110-acre walled enclave is so different from everything I knew before. The building we live in is basically a military barracks, so the apartment is extremely minimal. I'm a conservative dresser by nature, but as someone who loves fashion and once worked in public relations, not being able to buy or wear certain outfits has taken some getting used to. There are hundreds of people who live in Vatican City, but very few of us are women—including the 15 wives of the Swiss Guards—and we've gotten very close.

While my husband and I are free to express our love, we do have to be discreet, since we live in a holy place. We actually ran into some controversy recently when a Reuters photographer snapped a picture of us kissing while Dominic was in uniform. It's not as if we planned the photo or had anything to do with its release, but the image ended up going viral. I thought it was nice for the public to see that the guards have a human side, but that's not how everyone in the Vatican felt. Some were surprised—and not too pleased. There were no official repercussions, but the pushback was a reminder that our lives are not fully our own.

Sometimes, I get homesick for the sunny beaches I left behind. Marrying Dominic meant agreeing to a life where the church comes first, and that is not always easy. But even though I daydream of putting my feet in the sand and being back with my childhood friends, I wouldn't change a thing. I'm now working at the American University of Rome, and my morning commute involves brushing up against St. Peter's Basilica, which I can enter via a private door. The pope is my neighbor, the Sistine Chapel is in my backyard, and I go on long evening runs through the Vatican Gardens, which are closed to the public at that time of day. I never feel luckier than when I'm weaving through the wildflowers at dusk, the dome of St. Peter's behind me. And every time I see my husband come home in his Swiss Guard uniform, I can't help but smile. He's literally my knight in shining armor. **mc**



Bergamin was married in November 2014, in the oldest church in Vatican City, St. Stephen of Abyssinians

For the Australia native, admiring the Sistine Chapel never gets old



The couple live in the Swiss Guard family barracks, not far from the papal apartment

Attending Christmas mass at St. Peter's Basilica



By marrying, the couple made a commitment to stay in Vatican City at least three more years