

THE POPE'S ASSASSIN
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This book is dedicated to
Ioannes PP. XXIII
Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli
November 25, 1881-June 3, 1963
And to Ben Isaac as well.

PART ONE
AD MAIOREM DEI GLORIAM

An agreement was possible.

John XXIII

November 20, 1960

Instruct those you trust to reveal the secret on the first night of each election. The reading of it must be the first official act of every heir of Peter. It is vitally important that they acknowledge the secret. Let them guard it in a hidden place and permit no one else to read it. Any violation of this ritual could signify the end of our beloved and esteemed Church.”

Clement VII, June 17, 1530

1.

Vatican

April 19, 2005

Certainly, the canonical election of Cardinal Joseph Alois Ratzinger would always be remembered, for as long as memory exists, on this day of April, ending the papal vacancy since the 5th of that same month.

As soon as Sodano, the Vice-deacon of the College of Cardinals, asked for his acceptance of the position that God had selected, at the end of the fourth ballot, he did not hesitate to say “I accept.” And the five seconds he took to reply “Pope Benedict” to the question “What name do you wish to be called?” also indicated previous forethought. Don’t forget that Ratzinger was the Deacon of the College, that is, the one who would have asked the same questions to the elected candidate, had he not been the chosen one. It’s a curious fact that ninety percent of the memorable predecessors of this Benedict preferred a name different from the one their mothers gave them.

The faithful congregated in St. Peter’s Square, hoping that the smoke would be white, not the dark, ash color it was. Few of those present remembered the first and second conclaves of 1978 in which the same problem arose. Nine million Euros to organize a conclave, and they always forgot to clean the chimney of the Sistine Chapel. So, after ten minutes of waiting, with many leaving the Square, the bells of the Basilica roared with frenzied alarm, spreading smiles instead of fear, through the whole plaza and surroundings.

We have a Pope.

Inside the holy chapel the Gamarelli brothers fitted the papal vestments to the body of the new pontiff. There was no surprise this time. The expected candidate had won. It was always easier when the previous Pope had expressed his will. John XXIII did so when on his death bed he named Cardinal Giovanni Montini as his successor. In the case of the Polish Wojtyla the decision had been made earlier. One should never disobey the last wishes of a dying man, especially someone so close to the Creator.

Leaving the decision in the hands of the Holy Spirit subjected the Church to surprises like those of Pope Luciani and of Wojtyla himself.

Sodano could not have been happier. His beloved Church would remain secure. Ratzinger, since he dispensed with canonical protocol with his friends, was a known man in a known place. No one would do a better job.

The Chilean Jorge Medina Estevez was the first to appear at the balcony before the jubilant crowd. A new savior was about to be announced to the city and a world enraptured with the news, the name, the man.

The sixteenth Pope with the name Benedict was introduced to history. No one would ever be able to erase him from its pages, even if he reigned only one day.

Ratzinger gave himself up totally to this new persona he created and fulfilled the role with distinction. He was no longer the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, no longer a cardinal, but an institution with its own coat-of-arms and personal security. He made a short speech, composed that afternoon, in which he sensitively recalled the Polish Pope, so well loved. He blessed the city and the world, Catholic, naturally, and retired to take possession of all his properties.

From that hour he was responsible for an immeasurable, valuable empire. It would take months to learn of all its possessions, at least those they revealed to him. Of the rest... not even the High Pontiff himself could know everything he owned, nor would that be advisable.

Night fallen, while the world rejoiced with the image of Benedict on the Maderno balcony of St. Peter's Basilica greeting the crowd, a large committee led by the Shepherd of Shepherds himself began another more private ritual. The chamberlain Somalo broke the seals on the papal apartments in the apostolic apartments and opened the two massive doors before stepping back reverently to let the chosen of God enter. The chosen one had to enter his future living quarters before anyone else, taking possession of what was his. As soon as Ratzinger stepped inside what would be his final residence, he was followed by a crowd of assistants, religious and lay, who were privileged to serve the new owner.

After such a tiring day, it was late for dining. He answered some phone messages of congratulation from the more important chiefs-of-state, as diplomacy required, the ones that merited a personal thank you. For the rest a written message to the dignitaries of the embassies was enough. No one wanted to forget to congratulate the new Pope, but, if by chance someone did, there would be a price to pay. Humility and turning the other cheek were left to the religious orders who practiced such benevolence, or to Christ. In politics there is no room for mercy.

He entered his office after a light supper. Grilled meat with green beans, shredded carrots, and a drizzle of Riserva D'Oro olive oil over everything. The last time

he'd been there, he had been a mere cardinal, rather more like a prince, but now he was an emperor. Now he felt completely different. He passed his hand over the portentous desk. There he would sign the future decrees of *his* Church. He wanted her to be magnificent, matching the vestments he wore, set on very strong pillars, shielded in his strong, knowing hands. The reins were his.

He sat down and savored the moment. He remembered Wojtyla and the decades in which he had observed him sitting down heavily in the same chair and deciding the destiny of the Church. Sitting there it was impossible to forget that he was chosen for the office for life. Sodano and Somalo were watching him. A new Pope was taking possession of the Church.

At that moment another person entered. He wore a black cassock and kneeled with difficulty to greet Benedict with a kiss on the hand that still wore no ring. Many had already kissed his hand that day, but none so earnestly. The priest was old and breathed with difficulty.

"I don't remember seeing you before," Ratzinger said, smiling. Nothing upset him today.

"Pardon my interruption, Holy Father. My name is Ambrosiano. I was the confessor of our beloved Pope John Paul after the death of father Michalski," he explained, panting. "The canon law requires that Your Holiness confess tonight to begin your pontificate free of sin." He apologized, "Not that you have any, Holiness, please don't misunderstand me. Later you can choose your own confessor."

"The Society of Jesus has rigid rules. Didn't Cardinal Dezza also confess Pope Wojtyla?" Ratzinger asked.

"Only in the first few years, Holy Father. But Dezza confessed Pope Montini through his entire pontificate and Pope Luciani. Afterwards Pope Wojtyla named Dezza as Superior General of the Society until the new election, if you recall."

"Of course, of course. A great servant of the Church," he said, remembering the past. "And now Father Ambrosiano wants to confess me."

"It's the canon law, Holy Father," the priest repeated.

"And we must always respect the canons. I shall make sure of that," Ratzinger affirmed, brandishing his finger as if about to deliver a speech.

The priest pulled out a chain he wore at his neck with a key he used to open one of the drawers of the desk. A leather folder with a lock and an envelope with the pontifical coat-of-arms of his predecessor were inside. He took everything out of the drawer and set it on the desk in front of Benedict.

"Pope John Paul specifically instructed me to have your Holiness carefully read the content of this folder today. He left all the information specifically for you in this envelope," he explained, handing over the sealed envelope. "No one else can read it."

Benedict looked at the priest, the cardinals, and the envelope. "I shall respect His will," he said at last.

The two cardinals heard this as a request to retire and complied without delay. The wish of a Pope was an order.

"Read it at your leisure, Holy Father," the Jesuit priest said going out. "When you're ready, just call."

Benedict closed his eyes and leaned back. Thousands of thoughts flooded his mind. He was going to read a secret shared only among Popes. What an extraordinary way to begin his reign. Moments later he broke the seal on the envelope the Pole had left. The paper smelled musty.

Dear Chosen One,

I congratulate you on your election. History continues its glorious path after two thousand years. You have just accepted the most demanding duty on the planet. Prepare yourself. It will be a hard, ungrateful road, and the worst is that that begins right now.

Inside this folder you will find information read by few others. Crucial information about our Church. You must not...you cannot refuse to read it and you must instruct your secretaries to present it to your successor on the night of the next election.

The ritual began with Clement VII and development further with Pius IX and John XXIII. It has always been complied with, AND ALWAYS MUST BE. Unfortunately, you'll soon understand why.

I leave you in the good graces of God. May He illuminate you and give you strength to carry out the enormous duty you will find in the final pages. On your strength the future of our Church will depend.

John Paul II P.P.

October 29, 1978

Benedict was filled with curiosity after reading the letter Lolek had written almost twenty seven years ago. What devastating information could be inside this folder?

The envelope held a small gilt key that opened the folder. He took out almost one hundred pages and started reading them. Soon he realized by the sting of his tired eyes that he was not prepared for what he read. He read some passages again to make sure he had read them correctly, others he raced through as quickly as possible, as if to escape something distressing or inconvenient.

He finished reading after midnight. Exhausted, he locked up the folder and shut it in the desk drawer. Drops of sweat stood out on his forehead. His hands trembled. He laid his head on the desk until he regained some control over his nerves. Finally he calmed down. When he pushed himself up, he felt older, exhausted.

“God have mercy upon us,” he said, making the sign of the cross.

At this moment Father Ambrosiano returned to the papal office. Ratzinger looked different. Sorrow was wasting his soul. A silence filled with something too great to be silenced was punishing him. The Jesuit knew why. This time he didn't kneel to kiss the Pope's hand. Ratzinger approached him humbly and fell at his feet. He sobbed with tears that fell in torrents.

“Forgive me, Father. I have sinned,” the Pope implored closing his eyes.

Ambrosiano caressed the Pope's head with a comforting hand. “I know, my son. I know.”