

"HABEMUS PAPAM"

PONTIFICAL ELECTIONS FROM ST. PETER TO BENEDICT XVI

Interview with Ambrogio M. Piazzoni

"ALTHOUGH THAT NUMBER IS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE TRADITIONAL COUNT, I CANNOT CONFIRM THAT BENEDICT XVI IS THE 265TH POPE BECAUSE, ESPECIALLY IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES, WE DO NOT ALWAYS KNOW WHO WAS POPE AND WHO WASN'T. DURING THE LAST 50 YEARS OR SO IN THE ANNUARIO PONTIFICIO, THE OFFICIAL YEARBOOK OF THE HOLY SEE, THEY HAVE STOPPED NUMBERING THE PAPACIES"



The miniature in Jacopo Stefaneschi's *De Coronatione* probably depicting Boniface VIII's coronation and Celestine V's departure. Right, a photograph of Dr. Ambrogio Piazzoni, the vice-prefect of the Vatican Library. Below: Pius IX's *tiaregno* or tiara (1877)

BY LUCY GORDAN

For scholars and for culture writers like myself, one of the greatest professional joys is uncovering and connecting unexpected fragments of the puzzle called "history." So it isn't difficult to imagine my awe recently in the presence of three documents concerning the resignation of Pope Celestine V and the election of Pope Boniface VIII in the splendid exhibition "*Habemus Papam*': Pontifical Elections from St. Peter to Benedict XVI," on in the Lateran Palace until April 9. In my article "Jacopone da Todì: A Legendary Franciscan" (*Inside the Vatican*, February 2007) I had mentioned that, after the resignation of Celestine V, Jacopone was imprisoned by Pope Boniface VIII for protesting against his election.



Now before my eyes was a letter dated July 5, 1294, on parchment, from the 11 cardinals present at the two-year conclave (including Boniface VIII) notifying the reclusive monk, Celestine V, of his election as Pope. In a case opposite was a three-part historical account entitled *Opus Metricum* of the papacies of Celestine V and Boniface VIII, by Cardinal Jacopo Stefaneschi, a supporter of Boniface and patron of Giotto. Written between 1315-19, the first part concerns the papacy of Celestine V from his election to his resignation; the second (on display separately later in the section called "Coronations") is open to a miniature of Boniface VIII's coronation and concerns Boniface's election and coronation; and the third concerns Celestine V's later years and his canonization.

Displayed in chronological order, the oldest items on

exhibit are: (1) sarcophagi, sculpted with Christ as the “Good Shepherd” surrounded by his disciples; (2) samples of glassware like those in “Petros Eni” with gilded images of St. Peter and St. Paul, all from the 4th century (the most recent is a magnificent crucifix with an aquamarine worn by Pope John Paul II when he opened the Holy Doors to inaugurate Jubilee 2000); and (3) one of the two “Fisherman’s Rings” made by the jeweler Claudio Franchi and presented to Benedict XVI on April 25, 2005, together with its gold-plated casket.

The splendid catalogue (30 euros) published by De Luca Editori D’Arte opens with an essay entitled “*Le elezioni pontificie da San Pietro al Quattrocento*” by Ambrogio Piazzoni, vice-prefect of the Vatican Library, medieval historian, and professor of manuscript cataloguing at the University of Viterbo and of Latin Paleography at the *Augustiniana*. He is author of *Storia delle Elezioni Pontificie (History of Papal Elections)*, 2003.

On January 16 in his office, Piazzoni discussed his fascination with Church history, particularly papal elections.

Can you tell us about your formation and studies?

AMBROGIO PIAZZONI: One of six children, I was born near Varese (Italy) in 1951, but came to Rome as a teenager. I graduated with honors in philosophy from the University of Rome. I wrote my thesis on *The Relationship Between St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter the Venerable of Cluny in Burgundy*. They were two contemporary 12th-century Benedictine abbots who had different opinions on how to interpret *The Rule of St. Benedict* and so disagreed on how monks should behave.

Immediately following university, I took the course in diplomatic and archival paleography offered here at the Vatican’s Secret Archives. My intentions were to stay on at the University of Rome as a professor of medieval history. I’d just become an assistant professor when my head professor, the medievalist Raul Manzelli, suddenly died, an event which changed my life.

So you took a position at the Vatican?

PIAZZONI: In 1976 the new director of the Vatican publishing house was looking for a young historian who spoke several languages and knew something about theology. I speak English, French, and German and my university degree fulfilled the other requirements. So I moved to the Vatican Library in 1985. In 1998 I became the *Scriptor Latinus* and a year later the library’s first lay vice-prefect.

In the introduction to your fascinating book, *The History of Papal Elections*, now in its fifth Italian edition and trans-

lated into Polish and Spanish, you thank four people: Jorge Cardinal Mejía, the librarian of the Holy Roman Church, who has since retired; Don Raefaelle Farina, prefect of the Vatican Library and recently created bishop of Oderzo; Dr. Paolo Vian, the library’s *Scriptor Latinus*, and Diego Manetti of Piemme. Was one of them your mentor? If not, who was?

PIAZZONI: I owe a lot to each of them, but my first inspirations were Professor Manzelli, Professor Gustavo Vinay who taught me medieval Latin literature, and Professor Claudio Leonardi, professor of medieval literature at the University of Florence.

How did you come to love the study of history?

PIAZZONI: I can’t imagine not loving history. You can’t understand yourself unless you trace the story of your life and of your roots. You can’t understand current events unless you trace their past and understand how one event led to another to form the present state of affairs. To understand what’s before you, you have to look behind you. To live well in the present, you need an “historical mentality.” By that I mean a critical, analytical capacity to arrive at what really happened and why. You can’t ignore the past.

The most important thing about studying history is learning how to interpret historical sources. A historian has to dig out the substance in a source, not take for granted that everything written there is the truth, but rather consider the event from several sources and different points-of-view.

Why did you focus on Church history and especially on papal elections?

PIAZZONI: My passion for Church history goes back to grade school. In second or third grade I decided to write a biography of St. Ambrose because my name is Ambrogio, or Ambrose in English. I remember that my opening sentence was something like, “Under the Emperor Constantine, practicing Christianity went from being illegal to legal.” Next to the word *Constantine* I wrote my very first footnote: “Constantine was an important Roman emperor.”

Our readers would be interested to know a few quick facts about papal elections. What was the longest *sede vacante*, or period without a Pope, between one Pope’s death and the election of his successor? What were the longest and shortest conclaves? The longest and shortest papacies?

PIAZZONI: At the end of the fifth edition of *Storie delle Elezioni Pontificie* I’ve added an appendix of curiosities about the papal elections. The longest *sede vacante* took place in Viterbo.



The “*Habemus Papam*” of Pius XII in 1939

Gregory X (1271-1276) was elected in 1271 after 33 months. Before the establishment of the conclave — that is, the cardinals' isolation *cum clave* ("with a key," which is "*con clave*" in Italian and so "conclave" in English), instituted by Gregory X after the fiasco of his election — the Popes had been elected almost immediately after the death of each predecessor, sometimes even on the same day. Gregory's *Ubi Periculum* (1274) established a rule that the conclave could not begin until 10 days after the death of the Pope. So, after 1274, the shortest period between papacies was 11 days. The shortest conclave, but after a *sede vacante* of two weeks, was for the election of Julius II, the patron of Michelangelo and Raphael. It lasted only a few hours.

Fifty Popes have been elected in Vatican City, another 34 in Rome, and several have been elected elsewhere in Italy, some even outside Italy. Can you tell us something about the location of papal elections?

PIAZZONI: Pope John Paul II established a rule that from now on the Popes must always be elected in the Sistine Chapel (in the Vatican). He was elected there, and so were 24 of his predecessors. Ten others were elected in the *Capella Paolina*, or Pauline Chapel, and the remaining 16 in other chapels and rooms in the *Palazzo Apostolica*.

Papal elections elsewhere in Rome took place in the Quirinal Palace, in St. John Lateran, in Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, in the Septizonium, in Santa Cecilia, in St. Mary Major, in San Martino, in St. Peter in Chains, in San Clemente, in Santa Maria in Pallara, in San Gregorio al Cielo, and in San Cesario.

Outside of Rome, papal elections took place five times in Viterbo, Perugia, and Avignon, twice in Naples, and once each in Siena, Terracina, Velletri, Verona, Ferrara, Pisa, Constance, Arezzo, Anagni, Lyons, and Venice.

Before John Paul II and now Benedict XVI there were several non-Italian Popes. Who were they and when did they reign?

PIAZZONI: The first was Gelasius I in 492. He was from Africa. The others were: John IV in 640 from Dalmatia, Theodore I in 642 from Palestine, Gregory III in 731 from Syria, Zachary in 741 from Greece, Victor II in 1055 from Germany, Hadrian IV in 1154 from England, John XXI in 1276 from Portugal, Gregory XI in 1371 from France, Alexander VI in 1492 from Spain, and



(From top to bottom)
Portraits of Gregory XV (1621-1623),
Gregory XVI (1831-1846), and Pius VI (1775-1799)



Hadrian VI in 1522 from Holland.

Who were the youngest and oldest Popes to be elected?

PIAZZONI: John XII was 18 years old when he was elected in 955. Celestine III, elected in 1191, and Celestine V, elected in 1294, were both almost 85 years old. Benedict XVI and John XXIII were both elected at 78 years of age. Before them you have to go back to Innocent XII, elected in 1691, to find a Pope elected when older than age 70.

What were the shortest and the longest papacies?

PIAZZONI: We don't know the exact dates for the beginning of St. Peter's papacy (whether you count it from when Christ told him that he would be the keystone of his Church or from when Peter arrived in Rome) nor of his death. So, if not St. Peter himself, counting from perhaps 30 to 67 AD, or 37 years, the longest papacy is most likely Pius IX's from 1846 to 1878: 31 years, 7 months, and 21 days. The next longest was John Paul II's: 26 years, 5 months, and 21 days. The shortest, 33 days, at least in modern times, is John Paul I's.

Papal elections are supposed to be held in secret and without influence from the outside. But is there ever outside interference during conclaves?

PIAZZONI: The most shocking aspect of conclave history is that for several centuries — during the 1500s, 1600s, and 1700s — it was common practice for the royalty of Catholic Europe (France, Spain, Germany, Austria) to veto certain candidates. These were vetoes, not support. So kings and emperors did not say who should be elected Pope, but rather who should *not* be elected. So a cardinal was elected Pope only if no royal power had vetoed his candidacy. This badly weakened the power of the papacy.

Earlier, in the 10th century, important Roman families, like the Crescenzi or Tuscoli, or the German emperors, imposed their candidate even before the conclave, although the Pope was then "elected" according to the canonical rules.

On occasion, the Roman masses protested the cardinals' choice, as in the case of Callistus III (1455-58), for example.

On display in the “*Habemus Papam*” exhibit are several diaries, kept by officials or cardinals during conclaves, such as Valeriani’s (the pontifical master of ceremonies from 1738-78) from the 1769 conclave which elected Clement XIV. Where are the official records of the conclaves conserved? Are they available to scholars?

PIAZZONI: The problem is that you cannot prevent a cardinal from keeping a diary during the conclave or from broadcasting his vote publicly, even if he’s taken a vow not to speak out.

The individual ballots are each burned so it’s impossible to know afterwards who voted for whom, but the record books reporting how many votes each cardinal received and during which vote are conserved. Their present location depends on the conclave’s date: in the archives of the pontifical master of ceremonies, in the Secret Archives, or in the Pope’s private archives.

You are a medieval historian. Is there a historical figure that particularly fascinates you? A conclave? A Pope and his papacy?

PIAZZONI: Peter Abelard, the 12th-century French philosopher and theologian, particularly fascinates me. He was one of the first modern minds. He could think beyond the conventions and constrictions of his time.

Concerning the conclaves, there are some we know very little about because only a few documents have come down to us. About those, I’d like to know more. For example, I would like to know the whole truth about the election of Gregory VII.

A Pope who fascinates me is Gregory I or “The Great” (590-604), because he opened roads never opened before in the Western Church. He introduced the title: *Servus servorum dei* (“Servant of the servants of God”) as the Pope’s most important qualification, that of being bishop of Rome and servant of the faithful. He understood in a nutshell what the Church and the papacy should be. The faithful should serve God and the Pope should serve those who believe in God. The papacy was to be a service to the faithful.

His life before becoming Pope is also fascinating. He came from a powerful Roman family and held important political offices, becoming the prefect of Rome at a very young age. After Gregory I took his monastic vows and was more or less forced to become Pope, he continued to care deeply about the social needs of the Romans and not only the Romans. The idea of missionaries was his, and he sent St. Augustine and others to England and Northern Europe to convert the populations to Chris-

tianity. He was an Enlightened man with a capital E, as can be seen from his extensive writings.

Other great papacies are those of Gregory VII, Innocent III and Paul VI (now called by some “The Forgotten Pope” because he was overshadowed in between two other great Popes, John XXIII and John Paul II). His active role as one of the two masterminds of the Second Vatican Council, of modernizing the Church, of carrying out the Council’s recommendations and changes after the death of John XXIII, must not be forgotten.

In April 2005, prior to the last conclave, you spoke at one of our Vatican Forums about the history of papal elections and the possible next Pope. We met again fortuitously on the morning of April 19, 2005, when I came to the library to interview Don Farina (*Inside the Vatican*, July 2005). Where were you later that day at 18:43 when Cardinal Medina Estévez, the proto-deacon of the College of Cardinals, announced the election of Benedict XVI? How did you hear the news?

PIAZZONI: I was on the air at SAT 2000, the television station of CEI (*Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, or the Italian Episcopal Conference). We were commenting on the conclave’s activities to date, its progress, and its various possible outcomes. I saw the white smoke on the television screen in front of me. You could say I was in the right place at the right time. The first idea that came to mind was to explain why the Holy Father had chosen the name Benedict XVI.

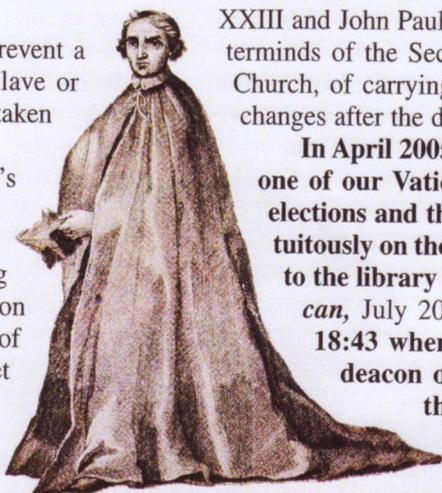
Do you have memories of other papal elections?

PIAZZONI: I remember something about each one since my early childhood. I was in St. Peter’s Square

when John Paul I and John Paul II were elected in 1978. I remember Paul VI’s election in 1963 and John XXIII’s in 1958. I was only seven when John XXIII was elected, but my father came from the small town Villa d’Adda, less than a mile from Sotto il Monte, where Roncalli was born.

Speaking of “*Habemus papam*,” who was the first Pope proclaimed from the balcony of St. Peter’s to the crowd in the Square below? The film at the end of the exhibit states that Pius XI (1922-1939) re-established the tradition.

PIAZZONI: I’m not sure how far back the balcony tradition goes — maybe to the first Pope elected after Maderno completed the facade in 1614. So it may have been Gregory XV in 1621. Pius IX broke with the tradition of appearing on the balcony because Rome became the capital of Italy and Pius IX exiled himself inside the Vatican walls, calling himself a “prisoner of Italy.” When his successor, Leo XIII, was elected in 1878, with



An engraving (1756) of typical dress for a cardinal during a conclave. Below: “Map of the Conclave” during Leo XI’s *sede vacante* in 1605.



deep regret he decided not to appear before the crowd in St. Peter's Square because it was occupied by Italy, an "enemy state." So, instead of appearing on the outside of St. Peter's, from an interior balcony he blessed the crowd inside the Basilica. His immediate successors, Pius X and Benedict XV, did the same. Everyone was taken by surprised when Pius XI blessed the crowd in the Square.

You are a member of the organizing committee of the exhibit "Habemus Papam." Many of the objects here have never been on public display before; is there a star object?

PIAZZONI: Since I'm a medieval historian and "codexologist," my favorite objects are obviously the manuscripts, in particular Jacopo Stefaneschi's *De coronatione*. Take a look at this illumination. It's been given various interpretations. You can see a miter on the ground which would be Celestine V's. Thus the illumination probably shows the coronation of Boniface VIII with Celestine V and his retinue walking off the page.

Another highlight for me is the Fisherman's Ring (the papal ring). The most recent ones, after being defaced, slashed, so they can no longer be used as a seal, are conserved in the archives of the papal master of ceremonies. We don't have earlier ones because, after being "broken," they were melted down and reused.

You have written one best-seller. Are you writing another book?

PIAZZONI: Yes, but it won't be a best-seller. It's about the manuscripts that are dated in the Vatican Library. They once belonged to Queen Christina of Sweden. As you know, manuscripts were handmade, unlike the volumes published today with an ISBN number and the date of publication. Only about 5% of the manuscripts in the Vatican Library are dated. Usually you find the date at the end or if you know the first owner's identity. We can date some of those undated by comparing the scripts and the provenance.

I also have a weekly TV program on SAT 2000 called "*L'anello del pescatore*" or "The Fisherman's Ring." Each episode lasts seven minutes, about each Pope's life.

Do you have a dream project?

PIAZZONI: Yes, to write a history book for young people which will inspire a love of history. Historiography develops and sharpens one's ability for analysis of events, be they past or present, to form one's own ideas and not be influenced by hearsay. These days everything broadcast on TV or written in the newspaper is interpreted as the truth, but we historians know that's not true. We're trained to look at several sources.

Which Pope has been the most misinterpreted by his contemporaries or historians?

PIAZZONI: Many have been misinterpreted, but the most recent one is certainly Pius XII and all the debate about whether he could have prevented Holocaust if he had been more critical

of the Nazis. We shouldn't just go with the flow of public opinion, jump on the bandwagon of what's the fashionable interpretation of the moment.

From the point of view of an historian, I can make the following several observations in chronological order. Pius XII was a great admirer of Teutonic, German culture. He was papal nuncio in Germany for many years. His election was applauded by the English, Italian and left-wing French press and highly criticized by most German newspapers, including the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which reported that, in spite of his many years in Germany, Pius XII was unable to understand the greatness of the National Socialist Movement and the rebirth of Germany.

Second, it is a known fact that, due to his intervention, the Church worldwide helped save more than 700,000 Jews. No other head of state saved more.

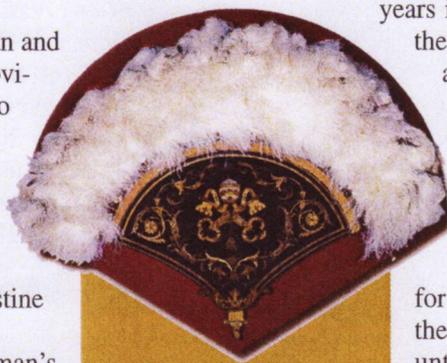
Third, immediately after the war, there were a number of testimonials praising Pius XII for his help in saving Jewish lives. These include the chief rabbi of Rome, Israel Zolli, who waited until after the war to convert to Christianity and took the baptismal name Eugenio, after Pius XII.

All the debate about Pius XII and the Holocaust dates to 1963, five years after his death, and stems from a German play called *The Deputy*, written by Rolf Hochhuth, until then an unknown playwright — a brilliant brainwash of the German people's social conscience. Its thesis was that the German people were basically good; only Hitler was evil. Without Hitler and his evil influence, the Germans would never have done what they did. He argued that if only Pius XII would have intervened more forcefully, he could have stopped Hitler and prevented the Holocaust. The play was a great success and caused such a commotion that now it's nearly impossible to mention any other aspect of Pius XII's life.

Those who defend Pius XII say that, if he had been more forceful, he wouldn't have been able to stop the persecution of the Jews, that he would only have accelerated it and caused more of them and of other minorities to die. Who can know? You can't make history with ifs. What fascinates me is that during the war, immediately afterwards, and even at his death, no one criticized his actions. These attacks started later during the Cold War.

It's time to move on and look at his accomplishments and reexamine his anti-racial speeches which, though very explicit and daring at the time, were unfortunately ineffective in controlling a madman's folly. Yet we mustn't forget, in his last desperate attempt to stop Hitler, his phrase, probably ghost-written by Montini: "Nothing is lost in peacetime, everything is lost during war." ●

Lucy Gordan is the culture and arts editor of Inside the Vatican.



A flabellum or muscatorium (1902) belonging to Leo XIII. It was used to fan away flies and other insects from the Pope and sacred objects during the liturgy. Below: A chair made in Paris and given to Pius IX in 1877

