

THE ELECTION OF POPE LEO XIV

The Last Surprise of Pope Francis

Gerard O'Connell and Elisabetta Piqué

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INTRODUCTION

WE KNEW THIS MOMENT would arrive. Although Pope Francis always showed unwavering strength, energy and courage despite his age and advancing ailments, his death was inexorable.

As he himself said in one of the dozens of interviews he granted, he was no Superman. And God called him on the morning of April 21, 2025.

In this book, in the form of a diary, we recount the impact of the death of the first Latin American and first Jesuit pope, not only on the world's 1.4 billion Catholics and on the cardinals who were to elect his successor, but also on us personally, as we had the extraordinary privilege of being his close friends for over twenty-four years.

From that shattering moment, we recount his apothecotic farewell and, set amidst the whirlwind that a papal transition always unleashes for journalists, piece together the path of Leo XIV's election, an outcome that very few had foreseen. It was, for us, Francis's final surprise.

The 2025 conclave—a mega-event religious and spiritual, but also political—unfolded with all the intrigue and intensity characteristic of papal elections, both real and fictional. Feeling ourselves suddenly like pieces in the very puzzle at hand, we describe how certain factions—the rigorists, the diplomats, Italian interests, and a combination of these—maneuvered to defy the harsh arithmetic, only to end up undermining their own cause.

Although it was a *cum clave* (with a key, secret) election, we were able, thanks to different sources, to reconstruct what the pre-conclave preparatory meetings called “general congregations” were like. We detail the events inside the Sistine Chapel where, in under than twenty-four hours, on May 8, Leo XIV—the first US-born pope,

Peruvian by adoption, the first pope “of both worlds,” the first Augustinian pope, the first missionary pope—was elected.

The book also covers his first days as the 267th successor of Peter—until his inauguration on May 18—which hint at a pontificate with its own style, distinct from his predecessor’s in form, but not in substance.

Writing this book together, and as a married couple, was an immense challenge. But we overcame it as you will see in the following pages....

—Gerard (Gerry) O’Connell and Elisabetta (Betta) Piqué

PART I

FAREWELL TO POPE FRANCIS

MONDAY, APRIL 21 [BETTA] _____

The Shock

GERRY WAKES ME AT 9:48 am “Betta . . . the pope . . . the pope is dead!”

This sentence changes everything. It changes our lives, it changes history. I am semi-paralyzed, but not surprised. We had seen him in such bad shape yesterday, Easter Sunday. Gerry and I were extremely worried. When he made that final outing in the popemobile, we were there in St. Peter’s Square. When he passed in front of the Press Office at the beginning of Via della Conciliazione, I had climbed a flowerpot and shouted “Father Jorge!” as I always called him. Gerry also tried to get his attention by waving his arms. But, unlike the hundreds of times in the midst of crowds and on his travels around the world, when he, who always connected visually with people, had seen us and greeted us, this time he did not respond. Accompanied by Juan Cruz Villalón, one of his private secretaries, who cared for him with striking tenderness during his final months of illness, Father Jorge was lost, in another dimension, looking only forward. We returned to the Press Room in anguish. I wanted to burst into tears. He was no longer himself. “Maybe he was saying goodbye,” Gerry commented, always the first to grasp the essence.

That’s why that Easter Sunday night, which we spent with friends at home—eating the traditional baked lamb—had not been a joyful dinner. Everyone, including Eva Fernández, our friend from the Spanish radio station Cope, was worried. We had seen Francis in very bad shape. And Gerry and I had gone to bed with that in mind. What’s more, we barely slept a wink all night, thinking that we would be unable to make our planned trip to Buenos Aires on Tuesday night to attend the May 3 wedding of my niece Isabella, daughter of my brother Enrico. How could we leave with Pope Francis in such bad shape?

So when Gerry abruptly wakes me with the most unwelcome news, although I’m shocked, I’m not really surprised. We’d sensed it coming.

GERRY IS ON THE PHONE with our friend Chris Lamb, a Vatican correspondent for CNN, who was in a taxi heading to the airport to return to his home in London after Easter. During that conversation, the Holy See Press Office sends a cryptic message via telegram at 9:45 AM to permanently accredited journalists:

A live broadcast will begin shortly from the Chapel of Casa Santa Marta. It will be possible to follow it on the Vatican News and Vatican Media channels.

Gerry and Chris listen together as American Cardinal Kevin Farrell, the *camerlengo* (chamberlain), the person who becomes the highest authority in the Holy See when a pope dies or resigns, announces the news at 9:47 AM. "It is with profound sorrow that I must announce the death of our Holy Father Francis. At 7:35 AM this morning, the Bishop of Rome, Francis, returned to the House of the Father."

As soon as Gerry hears Farrell's voice, he runs to get me. I jump out of bed. Then I send an email to the Argentine newspaper *La Nación*, where I've been a correspondent for more than twenty-five years. I also call Inés Capdevila, one of my bosses and a good friend at the newspaper. "The pope has died!" I tell her. She is shocked. She is in Poland on a trip and sets off the alarm in Buenos Aires where it is 5:00 AM and everything is ready: all that's left is to press a button for the obituary I've written to appear¹ along with dozens of other notes, all prepared months ago and especially since that stressful evening of February 22, when Pope Francis, hospitalized at the Gemelli Hospital since February 14, was for the first time on the verge of death due to an acute respiratory crisis and needed a blood transfusion because of kidney failure.

Gerry immediately calls two of the top editors at *America* magazine, for which he is the Vatican correspondent, but he can't reach them because it's still nighttime in New York. Only executive editor Ashley McKinless answers, and she is stunned by the news. He asks her to alert the other editors at *America* and sends her a brief note announcing the pope's death, which she quickly publishes along with

1. Elisabetta Piqué, "El Papa sencillo que rompió moldes y abrió la Iglesia como nunca antes," *La Nación*, April 21, 2025.

the obituary Gerry had updated when the pope was hospitalized on February 14.²

A few hours later, Sam Sawyer, SJ, editor-in-chief of *America*, calls him to let him know that *America* will be sending seven members of its team to help cover the papal transition. He tells him they will arrive in Rome on Friday, April 25.

Gerry also calls friends of his who are cardinals on three continents to share the sad news; he wakes some of them up.

He also tries to contact the producers at CTV Canada, with whom he has a contract for the papal transition, just as he had in 2005 when John Paul II died and in 2013 when Benedict XVI resigned. He can't reach anyone. It's after midnight in Toronto. Later, they tell him they'll send a reporter—Geneviève Beauchemin, Quebec bureau chief for CTV National News, with whom he worked when Francis traveled to Quebec on July 29, 2022, during his visit to Canada—and a cameraman. Since they will arrive later, they ask him to be available for live broadcasts and interviews at various times.

Juan Pablo and Carolina, our children, ages 19 and 17, are sleeping. In Italy, it's the traditional Easter Monday "Pasquetta" holiday when the children usually go out for picnics in the parks. Gerry wakes Juampy first, then Caro. "The pope has died. You were lucky to know such a great man," he tells them. For them, too, Pope Francis was always "Father Jorge"—that open, approachable, ever-present priest who would come to our house for dinner whenever he traveled to Rome, and who, because we had gotten along so well, Gerry and I had asked to baptize the children, both of whom had been born in Buenos Aires. He was delighted, and immediately agreed. At Gerry's request, the baptisms took place in the Church of San Ignacio in Buenos Aires—a copy of the Jesuit Church of the Gesù in Rome—the oldest church in Buenos Aires. Father Jorge baptized Juan Pablo first in 2005, and then Carolina in 2007. He gave each of them a small medallion depicting the Virgin of Luján, engraved with the date of their baptism and his initials, "JMB." Lately, he would laughingly call the children "the squatters," because we had told him they were actively participating in the protest occupations of their secondary school, the Liceo Classico Visconti, the oldest in Rome. Instead of being shocked, Father Jorge,

2. Gerard O'Connell, "Pope Francis, Trailblazing Jesuit with a Heart for the Poor, Dies at 88," *America*, April 21, 2025.

with his usual openness and youthful spirit, would laugh: "If they don't occupy the school and protest now, when will they?" he would comment. And he would call me the mother of "the revolutionaries."

MY CELL PHONE EXPLODES with WhatsApp messages. After dozens of fake news stories about Pope Francis's recent weeks of hospitalization and convalescence, everyone wants to know if it is true that the pope has died. The news is saying the pope has died. "Is it true?" my friends Sister Lucía Caram and Juan Carlos Cruz ask me from Spain. "Yes," Gerry and I answer.

In fact, it was our friend Cristina Cabrejas, the Vatican expert for the Spanish news agency EFE—an exceptional woman who recently lost her fantastic husband, Antonello Nusca, a photographer who had always worked with Gerry and me on our interviews with Francis—who broke the news about Francis's death. Cristina beat all the other international agencies to the punch. I am truly happy for her.

Our friend Annalisa Bilotta, a doctor at the Salvator Mundi International Hospital in Rome, who has helped us so much during recent weeks in interpreting the brief medical reports issued by the Vatican about Francis, also sends us a WhatsApp message to ask if it is true that the pope has died. When Gerry replies "Yes," she—always very professional—comments, "It happened as I predicted: it could happen at any moment, and it did."

My cell phone is exploding also because I have hundreds of interview requests. But over a month ago, I signed a contract with CNN as a contributor and analyst, giving me exclusivity with them, except for LN+, my newspaper's TV channel. It's logical. Everyone wants to talk to that Argentine journalist, a friend of the pope, a biographer of the pope, who knew him long before he was elected pope—having met him in 2001, more than twenty-four years ago!—and with whom he remained in contact until the end.

I receive hundreds of messages of condolence. "I'm sorry, Betta, I know you loved him very much." "A hug, I can imagine how you feel." "Be strong, Betta, this must be very hard for you." "I share your grief over the passing of our beloved Francisco." "I send you a big kiss, Betta, beyond journalistic concerns." "I'm sorry for your loss; I know the pope meant a lot to you."

Not even when my father died did I receive so many messages.

Gerry's cell phone is also ringing constantly. He receives condolence messages and phone calls, first from his eldest son Edwin in Brussels, then from his sister Fidelma in Ladispoli outside Rome. In addition, he has a surge of interview requests, not only from CTV, but also from various television and radio channels, ranging from the BBC to Al Jazeera, ITV, Channel 4, Sky TV, Australian and Irish television and radio, and several American television channels—too many to handle, which, fortunately, Lisa Manico, the media manager for *America* magazine, helps him filter.

In the midst of the madness and still in my nightgown, I send a few lines to my newspaper³ and then take a quick shower. A CNN producer calls and asks me to go to their office on Via di Col di Lana. I get ready and fill a backpack with a computer, tripod, selfie stick, makeup, and a brush: it's going to be a long day.

I take a taxi to CNN Rome as the WhatsApp tempest continues. I arrive at the office—for the first time since the 2005 conclave following the death of John Paul II, when I had a contract with CNN, but in Spanish that time—and it's chaos. No one knows what time I am supposed to go on air, nor do I know the producer who called me and asked me to come—he hadn't given me his name. The "Roman" correspondents Ben Wedeman and Barbie Latza Nadeau apologize for the chaos. Elise Allen, the wife of John Allen of Crux, who was also hired as a contributor, arrives with her sister who is visiting Rome. The best part, though, is that amid the confusion, my son Juampy arrives. He is in his first year of university studies in PPE (Politics, Philosophy and Economics), speaks perfect Italian, Spanish, and English and when Chris Lamb told us a few months ago that they were looking for someone to do an internship, we introduced Juan Pablo.... And he just started working with them a week ago. How crazy to think that twenty years ago, during the 2005 conclave, I was pregnant with him!

I decide to head to the Vatican, where the news is coming and where I'll meet with Gerry. I take another taxi there, and the driver reflects the mood of mourning that has suddenly taken over Rome. "Francis fought for everything there was to fight for; I'm sorry he's gone," he comments. He drops me off near Via della Conciliazione, where they have already put up fences and increased police presence

3. Elisabetta Piqué, "Murió el papa Francisco, informó el Vaticano," *La Nación*, April 21, 2025.

because many people, on hearing the sad news, want to come to pray, to be there, to show their grief for the passing of this man who had been so close to them, who had come from the end of the earth.

The most impressive thing is the ringing of the six immense bells of St. Peter's Basilica, signaling the pope's death. I make a video and tweet. What has begun is what is technically called the *sede vacante*, the power vacuum that opens in the Vatican when a pope dies or resigns. The cardinal *camerlengo* becomes a virtual technical director of the transition, marked by the general congregations, that is, the meetings of cardinals—which begins tomorrow—in which the next steps will be decided. Above all, the date of the conclave that will elect Francis's successor will be selected.

When I arrive at the Press Room, the atmosphere is one of mourning. Many colleagues come to embrace me. I don't break down with anyone. I tell everyone that Gerry and I had already realized on Sunday that Francis was in bad shape. And, in the end, it is better that he left like this, from one day to the next, after bidding farewell to his people in a grand manner from the popemobile and avoiding an end like that of John Paul II, who was in very poor health and evidently absent, managed by others, for several years.

Like John Paul II, Francis fought to the very end to be with his people. And he surely went "to the house of the Father" in peace, after having given everything for his flock during a Holy Week that represented a true tribulation.

ACCORDING TO VARIOUS SOURCES, Pope Francis had awakened at 6:00 AM "reasonably well."⁴ But half an hour later, at 7:00, he had the stroke that caused his death thirty-five minutes later.

His physique, which had endured a hectic schedule in recent years, was no longer the same. He was completely weakened after his fourth and final stay at the Gemelli, the popes' hospital, which he had left on March 23 a different person. Although with that indomitable spirit of his he had given his thumbs up as if to say everything was fine, he was far from recovered, and perhaps he sensed that he was going to return to his home in Santa Marta to try to recover, yes, but also perhaps to die, if that was God's will.

4. Elisabetta Piqué, "Las ultimas horas del Papa Francisco: una Semana Santa que fue un calvario y su esfuerzo final," *La Nación*, April 21, 2025.

It is true that, thanks to his determination to move forward and with the respiratory and motor physiotherapy exercises that had been prescribed for him, he had made “slight” improvements in the last three weeks. He had, in fact, resumed some work activities in a limited way, but he wasn’t the same. He wasn’t well, as could be seen in the images of his recent outings from his home in Santa Marta to be present during Holy Week, a time when he wanted to give his all. He was thinner, but with a swollen, almost deformed face, a stiff chin that prevented him from smiling, though his mind was completely clear.

“How are you experiencing this Easter?” Italian journalist Cristiana Caricato (TV 2000) had asked him on April 17, Holy Thursday, as he left Regina Coeli prison where, although he couldn’t perform the traditional foot washing, he had wanted to be with a group of inmates, to remind them that God forgives everything and that they were not alone. “I am living this Easter as best I can,” Pope Francis, a Jesuit who evidently had begun to perceive that God would soon call him, replied with great effort and difficulty. It was becoming an impossible mission to communicate the Gospel, not only in words, but also in concrete form.

Although doctors had prescribed a convalescence of at least two months and absolute rest, Francis, who had grown a little more obedient in recent times, would not heed them. The pope of the people [*pueblo*] wanted his end to be with the people.

That is why on Sunday after a two-minute greeting with the vice president of the United States in Santa Marta—when it was clearly evident that the pope was not well, according to the images released from the meeting—he made his great final effort, his final exertion.

At noon, amidst an eerie silence in St. Peter’s Square, he appeared for the last time, in his wheelchair, on that same central balcony of St. Peter’s Square from which he had astonished the world on the evening of March 13, 2013. Then, his body and, above all, his face, appeared, again, as on the day of his discharge from the Gemelli Hospital, as a symbol of suffering. There was no smile. His face was stiff. He had the look of a man, we now know, who was making a final effort. It was clear he wasn’t well, and a true reflection of this was that he had to read what will be remembered as his last public words: “Dear brothers and sisters, Happy Easter!” Francis, a pope we had known as a wizard of communication, had had to read that simple greeting. He was very ill. Despite this, after a collaborator read his Easter message—another call for peace in a world gone mad and in favor of the least

and the discarded—he managed to impart, with enormous difficulty, the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing to the city and the world.

Determined to say goodbye and to give his all, he then surprised everyone by climbing into the popemobile, braving the drafts, and making that final, marked turn, once again, in what we all realized was his final farewell. The Vatican cameras filming that final ride among thirty-five thousand people cheering him, with their cell phones aloft, focused on him from behind to avoid seeing his suffering face. Those of us who managed to see him from the front, waving his hands, but without seeking eye contact and with a serious expression, began to understand that this was his farewell. A farewell that included a stop for the popemobile to bless a child, giving his all, until the very end. “He died with the smell of sheep,” summed up a cardinal friend, like him a Jesuit.

THE VERTIGO DOESN’T SUBSIDE. Foreign ministries around the world send messages of condolence with unanimous praise for Pope Francis. It’s difficult to concentrate and write in the Press Room, which is being stormed by hundreds of journalists who are starting to arrive from everywhere on the planet. Many interrupt me to say hello, give me a hug, or ask for a comment. I try to be kind to everyone. It’s hot. I don’t understand why they don’t turn on the air conditioning.

I send a WhatsApp message to Isa—Isabella, my niece—to let her know, with immense sorrow, that we’ll have to cancel our trip to attend her wedding. I explain that the funeral and the conclave are coming up, which of course we have to cover, and that we’re deeply sorry, but it’s fate.

In the midst of the turmoil, I also contact Ulderico Baldesi at the travel agency to see how I can change those tickets—purchased in August of last year for a fortune—and, as is often the case because the airlines are thieves, I will lose.

My lifelong friend, Irene Hernández, former correspondent for Spain’s *El Mundo* and mother of one of Juan Pablo’s best friends Manuel—the boys grew up together and went to the same kindergarten when we were learning to be mothers—has also arrived in Rome. She is now working for the online site *El Confidencial* and is staying with our mutual friend, Ernesto Pérez, who is a film critic and friend of Cristina Taquini, whose birthday is today.

Irene and I covered the 2013 conclave together. Since it’s easier to request interviews together, the idea is to put the “dream team” back

together, this time of course with Gerry, the one Vatican expert who understood last time that the big surprise was going to be Jorge Bergoglio.

I write for a newspaper, I do live broadcasts for CNN and LN+ until late at night, just as Gerry does with his media outlets. When I'm faced with personal questions, asking how I'm experiencing all this, I don't flinch. I reply that I'm wearing my armor, the same that I habitually wear during my wartime coverage.

THE HOLY SEE ANNOUNCES THIS EVENING the causes of death of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on December 17, 1936, a resident of Vatican City. He died of a cerebral stroke (cerebrovascular accident, CVA); coma; and irreversible cardiocirculatory collapse, according to a document signed by Professor Andrea Arcan-geli, director of the Vatican's Directorate of Health and Hygiene. The document also certifies the deterioration of his physical condition. "He was already affected by several episodes of acute respiratory failure due to multi-microbial bilateral pneumonia; with multiple bronchiectasis; high blood pressure; and type II diabetes."

The Press Room publishes Pope Francis's final will and testament,⁵ which confirms that he had long known his end was coming, and for which he had been meticulously preparing.

In the name of the Most Holy Trinity. Amen. Feeling that the end of my earthly life is approaching, and with a lively hope for Eternal Life, I wish to set out my final wishes solely regarding the place of my burial.

Throughout my life, and during my ministry as a priest and bishop, I have always entrusted my life and my priestly and episcopal ministry to the Mother of Our Lord, Mary Most Holy. Therefore, I ask that my mortal remains rest awaiting the day of resurrection in the Papal Basilica of Saint Mary Major.

I wish that my last earthly journey conclude precisely in this ancient Marian shrine, where I came to pray at the beginning and end of each apostolic journey, to confidently entrust my intentions to the Immaculate Mother and thank her for her docile and maternal care. I ask that my tomb be prepared in the niche of the lateral aisle between the Pauline Chapel (Chapel of

5. Pope Francis's Testament, www.vaticannews.va, April 21, 2025.

the *Salus Populi Romani*) and the Sforza Chapel of the aforementioned papal basilica, as indicated in the attached appendix.

The tomb should be in the earth; simple, without special decorations, and with the only inscription: Franciscus.

May the Lord give the deserved reward to those who have loved me and will continue to pray for me. I offer the suffering that has been present in the latter part of my life to the Lord for peace in the world and brotherhood among peoples.

—Santa Marta, June 29, 2022, to express my testamentary wishes solely regarding the place of my burial.

ACCORDING TO THE APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION *Universi Dominici Gregis*,⁶ on the vacant See and the election of the Roman Pontiff, when the latter dies (or resigns), “the government of the Church is entrusted to the College of Cardinals solely for the conduct of ordinary or unavoidable affairs, and for the preparation of everything necessary for the election of the new pontiff.”

During this same period, the provisional head of Vatican City State is cardinal *camerlengo*. According to the Constitution governing the Roman Curia, upon the death of the pope, all heads of the dicasteries of the Roman Curia automatically resign from their positions.

When the See is vacant, the secretaries, including the substitute of the Secretariat of State, are responsible for the ordinary government of the curial institutions, dealing solely with ordinary matters.

Within the framework of these norms, this morning the dean of the College of Cardinals, ninety-one year old Giovanni Battista Re, sends an email to all cardinals informing them of the pope’s death and inviting them to the first meeting of the general congregations, that is, the plenary assembly of all cardinals, both electors (under age 80) and non-electors (over age 80), at 9:00 AM tomorrow, April 22.

A day later, Chinese Cardinal Joseph Zen, 93, archbishop emeritus of Hong Kong, harshly criticized this decision. “How are the elderly in the peripheries supposed to arrive on time?” But the truth is that Cardinal Farrell, the *camerlengo*, has complied with the Constitution by convening the first general congregation as soon as possible. There are many matters to be decided, including the date of the funeral.

6. Pope John Paul II, apostolic constitution *Universi Dominici Gregis*, www.vatican.va.

I HARDLY EAT ANYTHING all day. I have no time and no hunger. They announce that the Press Room closes at 10:30 PM, but I'm supposed to make one last connection at 10:10 PM. When I return to the Press Room after having left everything inside, it is already closed, and I panic because all my things—my wallet, my computer—are still inside. There's a homeless, long-bearded foreigner sitting on the entrance steps who advises me to ring the bell. I do, and luckily someone appears and lets me in. I retrieve my things. But my computer case and tripod case are missing. . . . I ask the *uscieri* (attendants), and no one finds anything. . . . Fortunately, my wallet is intact.

Since Francis's accession to the throne of Peter, many homeless people have camped out at night in the Vatican, in front of the Press Room and under Bernini's Colonnade. Will this change for them now that Francis is dead?

I ask this question of the homeless man who advised me to ring the doorbell, but who now reacts badly. Furious, he tries to take my cell phone, my main work tool. Stunned, I struggle until I get it back. A Brazilian colleague who happens to be there and sees the scene tells me that this man isn't well, that it's best if we leave.

It is dark. No one else is around, and the silence is broken only by the squawking of seagulls. I walk home, needing to walk, to refresh my brain. There's Caro, who's been abandoned all day, and Gerry and Juampy, who've also returned.

Exhausted, with a great emptiness and many memories burning bright, we eat very late . . . after midnight. Juampy prepares *spaghetti "aglio olio peperoncino"*—a classic, very simple dish with olive oil, chopped garlic, and spicy red pepper—which we wash down with a much-needed bottle of white wine. We toast Pope Francis, as he would surely have wanted us to: "Onward! Let's not lose our sense of humor!" he would have said.

Exhausted, we go to sleep, saddened by the abrupt end of a period of twelve years and thirty-nine very intense days, during which we were privileged witnesses of history, friends of a revolutionary pope who always accompanied us and was always present until the very end. And with the adrenaline rush of knowing that days and weeks of enormous work await us, of even more vertigo, and of strong emotions and suspense: Who will be chosen as his successor?