

CHRISTOPHER WHITE

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POPE

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LEO XIV

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INSIDE THE CONCLAVE AND THE  
DAWN OF A NEW PAPACY

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# Preface

## A Hornet's Nest: The Most Important Conclave in Sixty Years

**W**HILE MOST AMERICANS HAVE gotten used to hearing that the next presidential election is “the most important in the history of the country,” the same can’t exactly be said of papal elections, which go back two millennia. But before 133 cardinals entered the Sistine Chapel on May 7, several had told me they believed that the conclave of 2025 might be the most important in at least sixty years.

Pope John XXIII’s death on June 3, 1963, from stomach cancer at age eighty-one, presented a time of testing for the Catholic Church. Just one year earlier, the pope had presided over the opening of the Second Vatican Council, a landmark event in the history of Catholicism. This council promised to open up the Church to the modern world. To give this ambitious project context: The war in Vietnam had been grinding on for nearly a decade; Martin Luther King Jr. was leading the crusade for civil rights in the United States; and the threat of nuclear destruction loomed large. The Church was wrestling with the existential question of what role it was to play in a rapidly changing world.

When the council was announced on January 25, 1959, the news sent shockwaves through Rome and beyond. Councils are rare in the life of the Church. At the time of what would come to be called Vatican II, there were only twenty previous councils, and each was marked by both great promise and great trepidation. Speaking to nearly 2,500 bishops from all over the world at the start of the council in 1962, Pope John said that it was time for the Church to “look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate.”<sup>1</sup> While many past councils, often concerned with suppressing potential heresies that arose in Catholic life, had been inward looking, the Second Vatican Council was decidedly outwardly facing.

During its first session, debates centered on renewing Catholic liturgy; how the laity might become more active participants in the liturgy; and whether Latin should remain the universal language or could the Mass be celebrated in the local vernacular. Discussions were also held on the Catholic Church’s stance toward other Christian churches, the relationship between the Church and secular society, and more.<sup>2</sup> Beyond dealing with the particular issues, the council introduced a new style of operating within the Church. Bishops were speaking more frankly, drawing from their own experiences and backgrounds; theologians were integral participants in the debates; and representatives from other Christian churches were invited to be present in Rome.

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1. Pope John XXIII, “Solemn Opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council,” October 11, 1962, [www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/speeches/1962/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_spe\\_19621011\\_opening-council.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council.html).

2. Joseph Ratzinger, “The Second Vatican Council: The First Session,” *The Furrow*, vol. 14, no. 5, May 1963.

As one observer wrote after the first session, “I hadn’t realized that anything like this existed. I thought the Roman Catholic Church was a very closed, complacent and sectarian body that had nothing to learn from anybody else. I know that this is no longer accurate, if it ever was . . . the whole atmosphere is so different that, as Cardinal Bea says, it is a ‘real miracle.’”<sup>3</sup>

All of that was at stake following the death of Pope John early in the summer of 1963. Would the cardinals elect a new pope who would push ahead with the council as well as with the reforms it had set in motion? Or would they reverse course, afraid of the possibility that decades or even centuries of tradition could be undone? The conclave of 1963 would challenge all of this, leading *The New York Times* to declare that “in modern times, there has never been a papal election so important as that which starts in Rome tomorrow.”<sup>4</sup>

On June 21, 1962, when Giovanni Battista Montini emerged from the conclave, taking the name Pope Paul VI, it sent a signal that the reforms set in motion by John XXIII would continue. The former cardinal of Milan had been an ally of John XXIII and, though different in disposition (John XXIII had a winsome, extroverted, sometimes even comical personality compared to the more sober, contemplative Paul VI), Montini had been deeply engaged in the first session of the council. Even so, despite his support of the larger project, he knew the council would lead to a reckoning for the global institution. In fact, the night the council was first announced, Cardinal Montini called a friend and is said to have said of Pope John, “This holy old boy doesn’t realize what a hornet’s nest he’s stirring up!”<sup>5</sup>

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3. Ratzinger, “The Second Vatican Council.”

4. C. L. Sulzberger, “The New Pope—Two Types of ‘Liberal,’” *The New York Times*, June 19, 1963, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1963/06/19/89537628.pdf>.

5. Father Patrick Briscoe, “Through Study and Prayer, It’s Not Too Late to Get Vatican II Right,” *Our Sunday Visitor*, December 7, 2022, [www.oursundayvisitor.com/through-study-and-prayer-its-not-too-late-to-get-vatican-ii-right/](http://www.oursundayvisitor.com/through-study-and-prayer-its-not-too-late-to-get-vatican-ii-right/).

Fast forward to the end of the Francis papacy, when some of the pope's own cardinals had begun to characterize it in similar terms, sometimes using even more pointed descriptions. Two examples will suffice: First, before his death in 2023, Cardinal George Pell had penned a secret memo labeling the Francis papacy a “catastrophe,” and was actively promoting candidates who would bring back an era of law and order to the Vatican's governance.<sup>6</sup> Second, there was the former head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, German Cardinal Gerhard Müller, who went even further in his public criticisms, implying that Francis might have drifted into heresy for allowing priests to offer blessings to couples in same-sex unions.<sup>7</sup>

Yet for Francis, his entire papacy could be seen as trying—albeit fifty years later—to implement the reforms of the council initiated by Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, both of whom would be canonized during his papacy. The Second Vatican Council had unleashed tremendous change in the life of the Church. Among its landmark reforms were the greater participation of the Catholic laity in the life of the Church, the start of a new era in the Catholic Church's relationship with other religions, and a deepened commitment to religious liberty and pluralism. The council explicitly called for a style of governance that was meant to be more collegial. Above all, the council committed the Church to be more engaged with the world around it. And yet the council's embrace of these initiatives had been sluggish, met as they were with internal resistance and two popes who sustained a narrow understanding of the council's aims. In his first major document as pope, Francis turned to the

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6. Nicole Winfield, “‘Catastrophe’: Cardinal Pell's Secret Memo Blasts Francis,” *Associated Press*, January 12, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/vatican/vatican-news/catastrophe-cardinal-pells-secret-memo-blasts-francis>.

7. Cardinal Gerhard Müller, “Does *Fiducia Supplicans* Affirm Heresy?” *First Things*, February 16, 2024, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2024/02/does-fiducia-supplicans-affirm-heresy>.



council and anchored his own papacy in its call for an “ecclesial conversion as openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

In the twelve years that followed, Francis pursued that vision by radically reorienting the Church’s priorities. He demonstrated his commitment to this reorientation in several ways: by redirecting the Church to focus less on sexual ethics, while at the same time showing equal commitment to the needs of migrants and refugees and those facing environmental disaster; by putting women into high-ranking positions of power in the Vatican for the first time ever; by dismantling the papal court that had long defined the institution; and by launching a global process meant to invite Catholics around the world to bring their joys and anxieties with the Church so that the Church might find a better way to listen to them. Outside the Church, these changes were overwhelmingly greeted with thunderous applause. Like Pope John XXIII, Francis was named “Person of the Year” (in 2013) by *Time* magazine, which hailed him as “the people’s pope” for his courage in changing the often archaic and antiquated institution.<sup>9</sup>

Inside the Church, a hornet’s nest had been disturbed. In 2025, just as had been the case sixty years earlier, the cardinals were effectively facing a referendum on whether to continue down an established path. It’s not often that “never has a papal election so important” happens twice in one lifetime. But on May 8, when Pope Leo XIV was elected to succeed Francis, it was clear that history seemed likely to repeat itself.

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8. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

9. Howard Chua-Eoan and Elizabeth Dias, “Pope Francis, The People’s Pope,” *Time* magazine, December 11, 2013, <https://poy.time.com/2013/12/11/person-of-the-year-pope-francis-the-peoples-pope/>.