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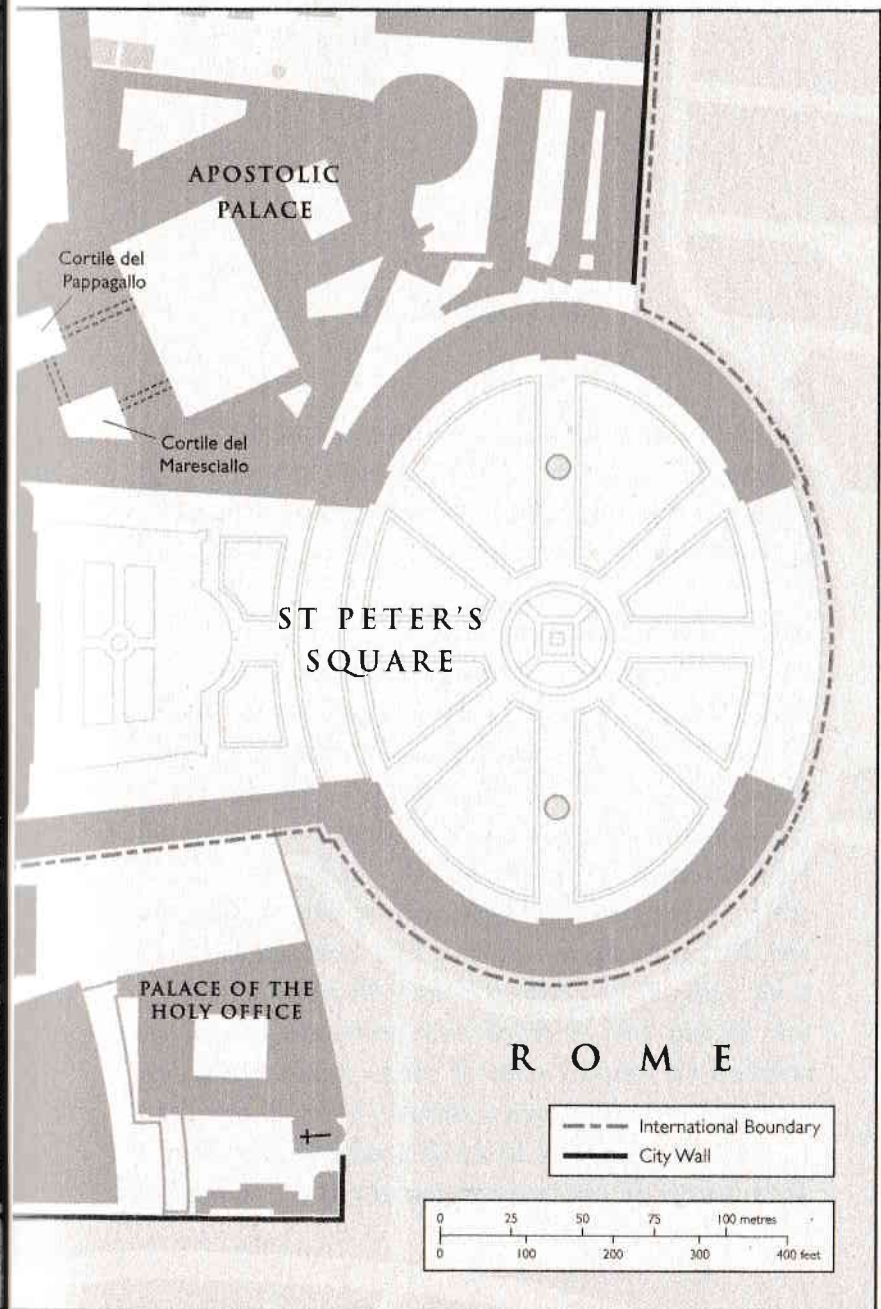
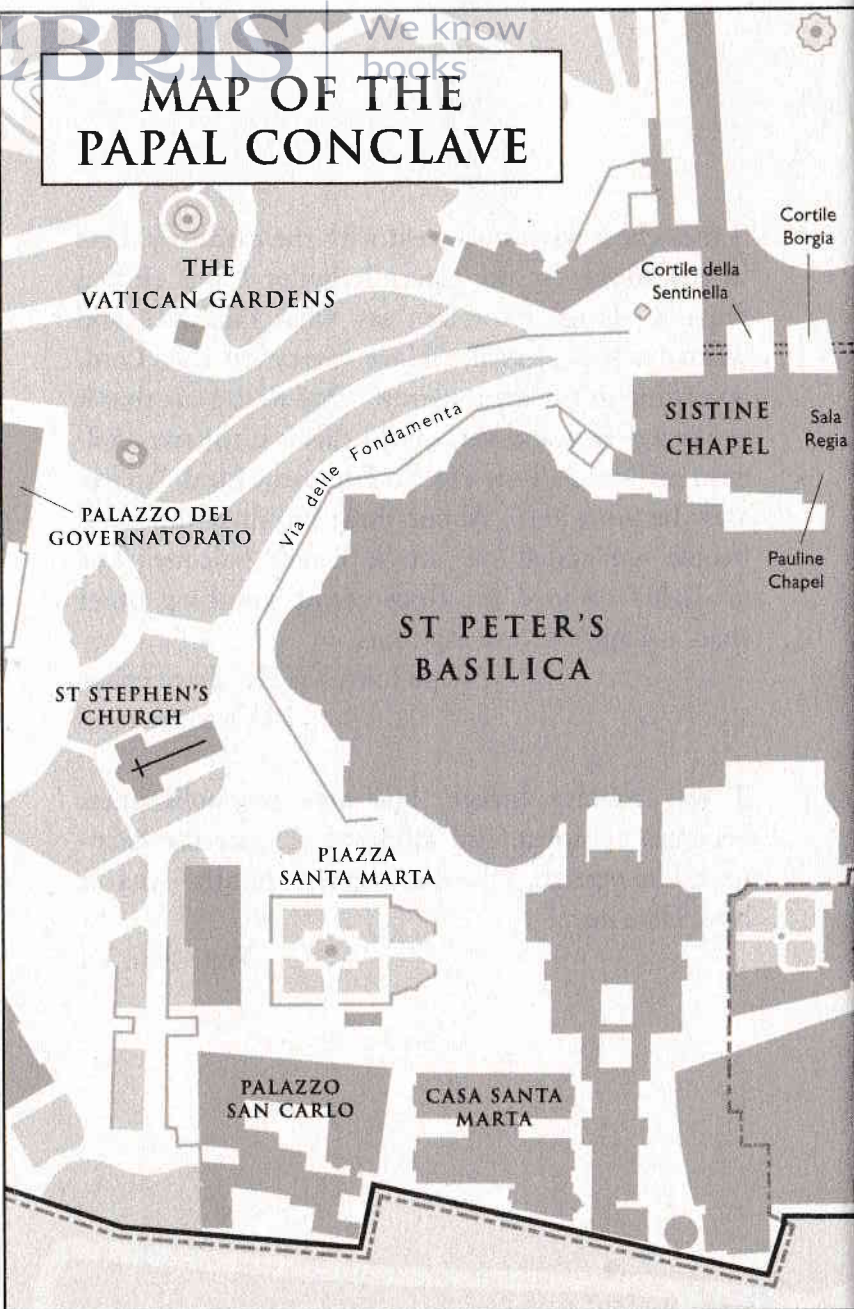
ROBERT  
HARRIS

Conclave



PENGUIN BOOKS

# MAP OF THE PAPAL CONCLAVE



## I

## Sede vacante

Cardinal Lomeli left his apartment in the Palace of the Holy Office shortly before two in the morning and hurried through the darkened cloisters of the Vatican towards the bedroom of the Pope.

He was praying: *O Lord, he still has so much to do, whereas all my useful work in Your service is completed. He is beloved, while I am forgotten. Spare him, Lord. Spare him. Take me instead.*

He toiled up the cobbled slope towards the Piazza Santa Marta. The Roman air was soft and misty, yet already he could detect the first faint chill of autumn. It was raining slightly. The Prefect of the Papal Household had sounded so panicked on the telephone, Lomeli was expecting to be met by a scene of pandemonium. In fact, the piazza was unusually quiet, apart from a solitary ambulance parked a discreet distance away, silhouetted against the floodlit southern flank of St Peter's. Its interior light was on, the windscreen wipers scudding back

and forth, close enough for him to be able to make out the faces of both the driver and his assistant. The driver was using a mobile phone, and Lomeli thought with a shock: they haven't come to take a sick man to the hospital, they've come to take away a body.

At the plate-glass entrance to the Casa Santa Marta, the Swiss Guard saluted, a white-gloved hand to a red-plumed helmet. 'Your Eminence.'

Lomeli, nodding towards the car, said, 'Will you please make sure that man isn't calling the media?'

The hostel had an austere, antiseptic atmosphere, like a private clinic. In the white-marbled lobby, a dozen priests, three in dressing gowns, stood around in bewilderment, as if a fire alarm had sounded and they were unsure of the correct procedure. Lomeli hesitated on the threshold, felt something in his left hand and saw that he was clutching his red zucchetto. He couldn't remember picking it up. He unfolded it and placed it on his head. His hair was damp to the touch. A bishop, an African, tried to intercept him as he walked towards the elevator, but Lomeli merely nodded in his direction and moved on.

The car took an age to come. He ought to have used the stairs, but he was too short of breath. He sensed the others looking at his back. He should

say something. The elevator arrived. The doors slid open. He turned and raised his hand in benediction.

'Pray,' he said.

He pressed the button for the second floor; the doors closed and he began to ascend.

*If it is Your will to call him to Your presence and leave me behind, then grant me the strength to be a rock for others.*

In the mirror, beneath the yellow light, his cadaverous face was grey and mottled. He yearned for a sign, for some infusion of strength. The elevator lurched to an abrupt halt but his stomach seemed to go on rising, and he had to grip the metal handrail to steady himself. He remembered riding with the Holy Father in this very car early in his papacy when two elderly monsignors had got in. Immediately they had fallen to their knees, stunned to find themselves face-to-face with Christ's representative on earth, at which the Pope had laughed and said, 'Don't worry, get up, I'm just an old sinner, no better than you . . .'

The cardinal raised his chin. His public mask. The doors opened. A thick curtain of dark suits parted to let him through. He heard one agent whisper into his sleeve, 'The dean is here.'

Diagonally across the landing, outside the papal suite, three nuns, members of the Company of the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul, were

holding hands and crying. Archbishop Woźniak, Prefect of the Papal Household, came forward to meet him. Behind his steel-rimmed glasses his watery grey eyes were puffy. He lifted his hands and said helplessly, 'Eminence . . .'

Lomeli took the archbishop's cheeks in his hands and pressed gently. He could feel the younger man's stubble. 'Janusz, your presence made him so happy.'

Then another bodyguard – or perhaps it was an undertaker: both professions dressed so alike – at any rate, another figure in black opened the door to the suite.

The little sitting room and the even smaller bedroom beyond it were crowded. Afterwards Lomeli made a list and came up with more than a dozen names of people present, not counting security – two doctors, two private secretaries, the Master of Papal Liturgical Celebrations, whose name was Archbishop Mandorff, at least four priests from the Apostolic Camera, Woźniak, and of course the four senior cardinals of the Catholic Church: the Secretary of State, Aldo Bellini; the Camerlengo – or Chamberlain – of the Holy See, Joseph Tremblay; the Cardinal Major Penitentiary, or confessor-in-chief, Joshua Adeyemi; and himself, as Dean of the College of Cardinals. In his vanity he had imagined that he had been the first to be summoned; in fact, he now saw, he was the last.

He followed Woźniak into the bedroom. It was the first time he had seen inside it. Always before, the big double doors had been shut. The Renaissance papal bed, a crucifix above it, faced into the sitting room. It took up almost all the space – square, heavy polished oak, far too big for the room. It provided the only touch of grandeur. Bellini and Tremblay were on their knees beside it with their heads bowed. Lomeli had to step over the backs of their legs to get round to the pillows where the Pope lay slightly propped up, his body concealed by the white counterpane, his hands folded on his chest above his plain iron pectoral cross.

He was not used to seeing the Holy Father without his spectacles. These lay folded on the nightstand beside a scuffed travel alarm clock. The frames had left red pinch-marks on either side of the bridge of his nose. Often the faces of the dead, in Lomeli's experience, were slack and stupid. But this one seemed alert, almost amused, as if interrupted in mid-sentence. As he bent to kiss the forehead, he noticed a faint smudge of white toothpaste at the left corner of the mouth, and caught the smell of peppermint and the hint of some floral shampoo.

'Why did He summon you when there was still so much you wanted to do?' he whispered.

*'Subvenite, Sancti Dei . . .'*

Adeyemi began intoning the liturgy. Lomeli

realised they had been waiting for him. He lowered himself carefully to his knees on the brightly polished parquet floor, cupped his hands together in prayer and rested them on the side of the counterpane. He burrowed his face into his palms.

*'... occurrite, Angeli Domini...'*

*Come to his aid, Saints of God; race to meet him, Angels of the Lord...*

The Nigerian cardinal's basso profundo reverberated around the tiny room.

*'... Suscipientes animam eius. Offerentes eam in conspectu Altissimi...'*

*Receive his soul and present it in the presence of the Most High...*

The words buzzed in Lomeli's head without meaning. It was happening more and more often. *I cry out to You, God, but You do not answer.* Some kind of spiritual insomnia, a kind of noisy interference, had crept over him during the past year, denying him that communion with the Holy Spirit he had once been able to achieve quite naturally. And, as with sleep, the more one desired meaningful prayer, the more elusive it became. He had confessed his crisis to the Pope at their final meeting – had asked permission to leave Rome, to give up his duties as Dean and retreat to a religious order. He was seventy-five, retirement age. But the Holy Father had been unexpectedly hard on him. 'Some are

chosen to be shepherds, and others are needed to manage the farm. Yours is not a pastoral role. You are not a shepherd. You are a manager. Do you think it's easy for me? I need you here. Don't worry. God will return to you. He always does.' Lomeli was hurt – a manager, is that how he sees me? – and there had been a coldness between them when they parted. That was the last time he saw him.

*'... Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine: et lux perpetua luceat ei...'*

*Eternal rest grant unto him, Lord: And let perpetual light shine upon him...*

When the liturgy had been recited, the four cardinals remained around the deathbed in silent prayer. After a couple of minutes Lomeli turned his head a fraction and half opened his eyes. Behind them in the sitting room, everyone was on their knees with their heads bowed. He pressed his face back into his hands.

It saddened him to think that their long association should have ended on such a note. He tried to remember when it had happened. Two weeks ago? No, a month – 17 September, to be exact, after the Mass to commemorate the Impression of the Stigmata upon St Francis – the longest period he had gone without a private audience since the Pope had been elected. Perhaps the Holy Father had already started to sense that death was close and that his

mission would not be completed; perhaps that accounted for his uncharacteristic irritation?

The room was utterly still. He wondered who would be the first to break the meditation. He guessed it would be Tremblay. The French Canadian was always in a hurry, a typical North American. And indeed, after a few more moments, Tremblay sighed – a long, theatrical, almost ecstatic exhalation. ‘He is with God,’ he said, and stretched out his arms. Lomeli thought he was about to deliver a blessing, but instead the gesture was a signal to two of his assistants from the Apostolic Camera, who entered the bedroom and helped him stand. One carried a silver box.

‘Archbishop Woźniak,’ said Tremblay, as everyone started getting to their feet, ‘would you be so kind as to bring me the Holy Father’s ring?’

Lomeli rose on knees that creaked after seven decades of constant genuflection. He pressed himself against the wall to allow the Prefect of the Papal Household to edge past. The ring did not come off easily. Poor Woźniak, sweating with embarrassment, had to work it back and forth over the knuckle. But eventually it came free and he carried it on his outstretched palm to Tremblay, who took a pair of shears from the silver box – the sort of tool one might use to dead-head roses, thought Lomeli – and inserted the seal of the ring between the blades. He

squeezed hard, grimacing with the effort. There was a sudden snap, and the metal disc depicting St Peter hauling in a fisherman’s net was severed.

‘*Sede vacante,*’ Tremblay announced. ‘The throne of the Holy See is vacant.’

Lomeli spent a few minutes gazing down at the bed in contemplative farewell, then helped Tremblay lay a thin white veil over the Pope’s face. The vigil broke up into whispering groups.

He moved back into the sitting room. He wondered how the Pope could have borne it, year after year – not just living surrounded by armed guards, but this place. Fifty anonymous square metres, furnished to suit the income and taste of some mid-level commercial salesman. There was nothing personal in it. Pale lemon walls and curtains. A parquet floor for easy cleaning. Standard-issue table, desk, plus sofa and two armchairs, scallop-backed and upholstered in some blue washable fabric. Even the dark wooden prie-dieu was identical to a hundred others in the hostel. The Holy Father had stayed here as a cardinal before the Conclave that elected him Pope, and had never moved out: one look at the luxurious apartment to which he was entitled in the Apostolic Palace, with its library and its private chapel, had been enough to send him running. His war with the

Vatican's old guard had started right here, on that issue, on his first day. When some of the heads of the Curia had demurred at his decision as not being appropriate for the dignity of a Pope, he had quoted at them, as if they were schoolboys, Christ's instruction to his disciples: *Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics.* From then on, being human, they had felt his reproachful eye upon them every time they went home to their grand official apartments; and, being human, they had resented it.

The Secretary of State, Bellini, was standing by the desk with his back to the room. His term of office had ended with the breaking of the Fisherman's Ring, and his tall, thin, ascetic frame, which he usually carried as erect as a Lombardy poplar, looked as if it had been snapped along with it.

Lomeli said, 'My dear Aldo, I am so very sorry.'

He saw that Bellini was examining the travelling chess set that the Holy Father used to carry around in his briefcase. He was running a long, pale forefinger back and forth over the tiny red and white plastic pieces. They were crowded intricately together in the centre of the board, locked in some abstruse battle now destined never to be resolved. Bellini said distractedly, 'Do you think anyone would mind if I took this, as a keepsake?'

'I'm sure not.'

'We used to play quite often at the end of the day. He said it helped him relax.'

'Who won?'

'He did. Always.'

'Take it,' urged Lomeli. 'He loved you more than anyone. He would have wanted you to have it. Take it.'

Bellini glanced around. 'I suppose one should wait and ask for permission. But it appears that our zealous Camerlengo is about to seal the apartment.'

He nodded to where Tremblay and his priest-assistants were gathered around the coffee table laying out the materials he needed to affix to the doors – red ribbons, wax, tape.

Suddenly Bellini's eyes filled with tears. He had a reputation for coldness – the aloof and bloodless intellectual. Lomeli had never seen him show emotion. It shocked him. He put a hand on Bellini's arm and said sympathetically, 'What happened, do you know?'

'They say a heart attack.'

'But I thought he had the heart of a bull.'

'Not entirely, to be honest. There had been warnings.'

Lomeli blinked in surprise. 'I hadn't heard that.'

'Well, he didn't want anyone to know. He said the moment word got out, they would start spreading rumours that he was going to resign.'