



# 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

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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

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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

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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

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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.’

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*They.* Bellini didn't have to spell out who *they* were. He meant the Curia. For the second time that night, Lomeli felt obscurely slighted. Was that why he knew nothing of this long-standing medical problem? Because the Holy Father had thought of him not only as a manager, but as one of *them*?

He said, 'I think we'll have to be very careful what we say about his condition to the media. You know better than I do what they're like. They'll want to know about any history of heart trouble, and what exactly we did about it. And if it turns out it was all hushed up and we did nothing, they'll demand to know why.' Now that the initial shock was wearing off, he was beginning to perceive a whole series of urgent questions that the world would want answering – indeed that he wanted answering himself. 'Tell me, was anyone with the Holy Father when he died? Did he receive absolution?'

Bellini shook his head. 'No, I'm afraid he was already dead when he was discovered.'

'Who found him? When?' Lomeli beckoned to Archbishop Woźniak to join them. 'Janusz, I know this is hard for you, but we'll need to prepare a detailed statement. Who discovered the Holy Father's body?'

'I did, Your Eminence.'

'Well, thank God, that's something.' Of all the members of the Papal Household, Woźniak was the one who had been closest to the Pope. It was

comforting to think that he had been the first on the scene. And also, purely from a public relations point of view, better him than a security guard; better him by far than a nun. 'What did you do?'

'I called the Holy Father's doctor.'

'And how quickly did he arrive?'

'Immediately, Eminence. He always spent the night in the room next door.'

'But there was nothing to be done?'

'No. We had all the equipment necessary for resuscitation. But it was too late.'

Lomeli thought it over. 'You discovered him in bed?'

'Yes. He was quite peaceful, almost as he looks now. I thought he was asleep.'

'This was at what time?'

'Around eleven thirty, Eminence.'

'*Eleven thirty?*' That was more than two and a half hours ago.

Lomeli's surprise must have shown in his face, because Woźniak said quickly, 'I would have called you sooner, but Cardinal Tremblay took charge of the situation.'

Tremblay's head turned at the mention of his name. It was such a small room. He was only a couple of paces away; he was beside them in an instant. Despite the hour, his appearance was fresh and handsome, his thick silver hair immaculately coiffed, his body

trim and carried lightly. He looked like a retired athlete who had made a successful transition to television sports presenter; Lomeli vaguely remembered that he had played ice hockey in his youth. The French Canadian said, in his careful Italian, 'I'm so sorry, Jacopo, if you feel offended by the delay in informing you – I know His Holiness had no closer colleagues than you and Aldo – but I felt as Camerlengo that my first responsibility was to secure the integrity of the Church. I told Janusz to hold off from calling you so that we could have a brief period of calm to ascertain all the facts.' He pressed his hands together piously, as if in prayer.

The man was insufferable. Lomeli said, 'My dear Joe, my only concerns are for the soul of the Holy Father and the well-being of the Church. Whether I am told a thing at midnight or at two is neither here nor there as far as I'm concerned. I am sure you acted for the best.'

'It's simply that when a Pope dies unexpectedly, any mistakes made in the initial shock and confusion can lead to all manner of malicious rumours afterwards. You only have to remember the tragedy of Pope John Paul I – we've spent the past forty years trying to convince the world he wasn't murdered, and all because nobody wanted to admit his body was discovered by a nun. This time, there must be no discrepancies in the official account.'

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From within his cassock he drew a folded sheet of paper and handed it to Lomeli. It was warm to the touch. (Hot off the press, thought Lomeli.) Neatly printed on a word processor, it was headed, in English, 'Timeline'. Lomeli ran his finger down the columns of type. At 7.30 p.m., the Holy Father had eaten with Woźniak in the cordoned-off space reserved for him in the dining room of the Casa Santa Marta. At 8.30, he had retired to his apartment and had read and meditated on a passage from *The Imitation of Christ* (Chapter 8, 'Of the dangers of intimacy'). At 9.30, he had gone to bed. At 11.30, Archbishop Woźniak had checked to see that he was well and had failed to observe any vital functions. At 11.34, Dr Giulio Baldinotti, seconded from the Vatican's San Raffaele Hospital in Milan, commenced emergency treatment. A combination of cardiac massage and defibrillation was attempted, without result. The Holy Father had been pronounced dead at 12.12 a.m.

Cardinal Adeyemi came up behind Lomeli and began reading over his shoulder. The Nigerian always smelled strongly of cologne. Lomeli could feel his warm breath on the side of his neck. The power of Adeyemi's physical presence was too much for him. He gave him the document and turned away, only to have more papers thrust into his hand by Tremblay.



‘What’s all this?’

‘The Holy Father’s most recent medical records. I had them brought over. This is an angiogram conducted last month. You can see here,’ said Tremblay, holding up an X-ray to the central light, ‘there is evidence of blockage . . .’

The monochrome image was tendrilled, fibrous – sinister. Lomeli recoiled. What in God’s name was the point of it? The Pope had been in his eighties. There was nothing suspicious about his passing. How long was he supposed to live? It was his soul upon which they should be focused at this moment, not his arteries. He said firmly, ‘Release the data if you must, but not the photograph. It’s too intrusive. It demeans him.’

Bellini said, ‘I agree.’

‘I suppose,’ added Lomeli, ‘you’ll tell us next there will have to be an autopsy?’

‘Well, there are bound to be rumours if there isn’t.’

‘This is true,’ said Bellini. ‘Once, God explained all mysteries. Now He has been usurped by conspiracy theorists. They are the heretics of the age.’

Adeyemi had finished reading the timeline. He took off his gold-framed glasses and sucked on the stem. ‘What was the Holy Father doing *before* seven thirty?’

Woźniak answered. ‘He was celebrating vespers, Eminence, here in the Casa Santa Marta.’

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‘Then we should say so. It was his last sacramental act, and implies a state of grace, especially as there was no opportunity for the viaticum.’

‘A good point,’ said Tremblay. ‘I’ll add it.’

‘And going back further – the time before vespers,’ Adeyemi persisted. ‘What was he doing then?’

‘Routine meetings, as far as I understand it.’ Tremblay sounded defensive. ‘I don’t have all the facts. I was concentrating on the hours immediately before his death.’

‘Who was the last to have a scheduled meeting with him?’

‘I believe, in fact, that may have been me,’ said Tremblay. ‘I saw him at four. Is that right, Janusz? Was I the last?’

‘You were, Eminence.’

‘And how was he when you spoke to him? Did he give any indication he was ill?’

‘No, none that I recall.’

‘What about later, when he had dinner with you, Archbishop?’

Woźniak looked at Tremblay, as if seeking his permission before replying. ‘He was tired. Very, very tired. He had no appetite. His voice sounded hoarse. I should have realised—’ He stopped.

‘You have nothing to reproach yourself with.’ Adeyemi returned the document to Tremblay and put his glasses back on. There was a careful theatricality

to his movements. He was always conscious of his dignity. A true prince of the Church. ‘Put in all of the meetings he had that day. It will show how hard he was working, right up to the end. It will prove there was no reason for anyone to suspect he was ill.’

‘On the contrary,’ said Tremblay, ‘isn’t there a danger that if we release his full schedule, it will look as if we were placing a huge burden on a sick man?’

‘The papacy *is* a huge burden. People need to be reminded of that.’

Tremblay frowned and said nothing. Bellini glanced at the floor. A slight but definite tension had arisen, and it took Lomeli a few moments to realise why. Reminding people of the immense burden of the papacy carried the obvious implication that it was an office best filled by a younger man – and Adeyemi, at just over sixty, was nearly a decade younger than the other two.

Eventually Lomeli said, ‘May I suggest that we amend the document to include the Holy Father’s attendance at vespers, but otherwise issue it as it stands? And that as a precaution we also prepare a second document listing the Holy Father’s appointments for the entire day, and keep it in reserve in case it becomes necessary?’

Adeyemi and Tremblay exchanged brief looks, then nodded, and Bellini said drily, ‘Thank God for

our Dean. I can see we may have need of his diplomatic skills in the days to come.'

Later, Lomeli would look back on this as the moment when the contest for the succession began.

All three cardinals were known to have factions of supporters inside the electoral college: Bellini, the great intellectual hope of the liberals for as long as Lomeli could remember, a former rector of the Gregorian University and former Archbishop of Milan; Tremblay, who as well as serving as Camerlengo was Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, a candidate therefore with links to the Third World, who had the advantage of seeming to be an American without the disadvantage of actually being one; and Adeyemi, who carried within him like a divine spark the revolutionary possibility, endlessly fascinating to the media, that he might one day become 'the first black Pope'.

And slowly, as he observed the manoeuvring begin in the Casa Santa Marta, the realisation came upon Lomeli that it would fall to him, as Dean of the College of Cardinals, to manage the election. It was a duty he had never expected to perform. He had been diagnosed with prostate cancer a few years earlier, and although he had supposedly been cured, he had always assumed he would die before the

Pope. He had only ever thought of himself as a stop-gap. He had tried to resign. But now it seemed he would be responsible for the organisation of a Conclave in the most difficult of circumstances.

He closed his eyes. *If it is Your will, O Lord, that I should have to discharge this duty, I pray that You will give me the wisdom to perform it in a manner that will strengthen our Mother the Church . . .*

He would have to be impartial – that first and foremost. He opened his eyes and said, ‘Has anyone telephoned Cardinal Tedesco?’

‘No,’ said Tremblay. ‘Tedesco, of all people? Why? Do you think we need to?’

‘Well, given his position in the Church, it would be a courtesy—’

‘A courtesy?’ cried Bellini. ‘What has he done to deserve courtesy? If any one man can be said to have killed the Holy Father, he did!’

Lomeli had sympathy for his anguish. Of all the late Pope’s critics, Tedesco had been the most savage, pushing his attacks on the Holy Father and on Bellini to the point, some thought, of schism. There had even been talk of excommunication. Nevertheless, he enjoyed a devoted following among the traditionalists, which was bound to make him a prominent candidate for the succession.

‘Still, I should call him,’ said Lomeli. ‘It will be better if he hears the news from us rather than from

some reporter. God knows what he might say off the cuff.'

He lifted the desk telephone from its cradle and pressed zero. An operator, her voice shaky with emotion, asked how she could help him.

'Please put me through to the Patriarch's Palace in Venice – to Cardinal Tedesco's private line.'

He assumed there would be no answer – after all, it was not yet three in the morning – but the phone didn't even finish its first ring before it was picked up. A gruff voice said, 'Tedesco.'

The other cardinals were talking quietly with one another about the timetable for the funeral. Lomeli held up his hand for silence and turned his back so he could concentrate on the call.

'Goffredo? It's Lomeli. I'm afraid I have terrible news. The Holy Father has just passed away.' There was a long pause. Lomeli could hear some sort of noise in the background. A footstep? A door? 'Patriarch? Did you hear what I said?'

Tedesco's voice sounded hollow in the cavernousness of his official residence. 'Thank you, Lomeli. I shall pray for his soul.'

There was a click. The line went dead. 'Goffredo?' Lomeli held the phone at arm's length and frowned at it.

Tremblay said, 'Well?'

'He already knew.'

‘Are you sure?’ From inside his cassock Tremblay took out what appeared to be a prayer book bound in black leather, but which turned out to be a mobile phone.

‘Of course he knew,’ said Bellini. ‘This place is full of his supporters. He probably knew before we did. If we’re not careful, he will make the official announcement himself, in St Mark’s Square.’

‘It sounded as though there was someone with him . . .’

Tremblay was stroking his screen rapidly with his thumb, scrolling through data. ‘That’s entirely possible. Rumours that the Pope is dead are already trending on social media. We shall have to move quickly. May I make a suggestion?’

And now came the second disagreement of the night, as Tremblay urged that the transfer of the Pope’s body to the mortuary should take place straight away rather than be delayed until the morning (‘We cannot allow ourselves to fall behind the news cycle; it would be a disaster’). He proposed that the official announcement should be released at once and that two film crews from the Vatican Television Centre plus three pool photographers and a newspaper reporter should be allowed into the Piazza Santa Marta to record the transfer of the body from the building to the ambulance. His reasoning was that if they moved quickly, the footage

would be broadcast live and the Church would be sure to have maximum exposure. In the great Asian centres of the Catholic faith it was morning; in Latin and North America, evening; only the Europeans and the Africans would be obliged to wake to the news.

Again, Adeyemi objected. For the sake of the dignity of the office, he argued, they should wait for daylight, and for a hearse and a proper casket that could be taken out draped with the papal flag. Bellini countered sharply: 'The Holy Father would not have cared a fig about dignity. It was as one of the humble of the earth that he chose to live, and it is as one of the humble poor that he would wish to be seen in death.'

Lomeli concurred. 'Remember, this was a man who refused to ride in a limousine. An ambulance is the nearest we can give him now to public transport.'

Nevertheless, Adeyemi would not change his mind. In the end he had to be outvoted three to one. It was also agreed that the Pope's body should be embalmed. Lomeli said, 'But we must ensure it's done properly.' He had never forgotten filing past Pope Paul VI's body in St Peter's in 1978: in the August heat, the face had turned greyish-green, the jaw had sagged, and there was a definite whiff of corruption. Yet even that ghoulisn embarrassment wasn't as bad as the occasion twenty years previously, when Pope Pius XII's body had fermented in



its coffin and exploded like a firecracker outside the church of St John Lateran. ‘And another thing,’ he added. ‘We must make sure no one takes any photographs of the body.’ That indignity, too, had been inflicted upon Pius XII, whose corpse had been shown in news magazines all over the world.

Tremblay went off to make the arrangements with the media office of the Holy See, and less than thirty minutes later, the ambulance men – their phones confiscated – came and took the Holy Father out of the papal apartment in a white plastic body bag strapped to a wheeled stretcher. They paused with it on the second floor while the four cardinals went down ahead in the elevator so that they could meet it in the hotel lobby and escort it off the premises. The humility of the body in death, the smallness of it, the little rounded foetus shape of the feet and the head, seemed to Lomeli to make a profound statement. *And he bought fine linen, and took him down, and wrapped him in the linen, and laid him in a sepulchre . . .* The children of the Son of Man were all equal at the last, he reflected; all were dependent on God’s mercy for the hope of resurrection.

The lobby and the lower flight of the staircase were lined by religious of all ranks. It was their silence that imprinted itself most indelibly on Lomeli’s mind. When the elevator doors opened and the body was wheeled out, the only sound – to his

dismay – was the click and whirl of phone cameras, interspersed with an occasional sob. Tremblay and Adeyemi walked at the head of the stretcher, Lomeli and Bellini at the rear, with the prelates of the Apostolic Camera in a file behind them. They processed through the doors and into the October chill. The drizzle had ceased. There were even a few stars. They passed between the two Swiss Guards and made towards a crucible of multicoloured light – the flashes of the waiting ambulance and its police escort streaking like blue sunbeams around the rain-slicked piazza, the white strobe effect of the photographers, the engulfing yellow glare thrown up by the lamps of the TV crews, and behind all these, rising out of the shadows, the gigantic illuminated glow of St Peter's.

As they reached the ambulance, Lomeli tried to picture the Universal Church at that moment – some one and a quarter billion souls: the ragged crowds gathered around the television sets in the slums of Manila and São Paulo, the swarms of commuters in Tokyo and Shanghai hypnotised by their mobile phones, the sports fans in the bars of Boston and New York whose games were being interrupted . . .

*Go forth and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit . . .*

The body slid head-first into the back of the

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