

The Conclave
Of October 28, 1958
(Chapter 8 in Il Papa Non Eletto by Benny Lai)
Translated by Nellie Villegas

The unforeseen worsening of the health conditions of Pius XII, understood in the space of forty-eight hours of arterio-cerebral spasms, impeded the archbishop of Genoa from running up to Castel Gandolfo while the Pope was still alive. The cardinal took the train to Rome on the day after the death of the Pope, that being October 9, 1958, and at the triumphal transport of the corpse into the Vatican, with the aim to be present at the last three ceremonies of the “novendiali”, the nine funeral masses for the repose of the defunct Pontiff. There would not prove to be interest for the general congregations of the Sacred College, the assembled preparatory cardinals of the conclave, that offered to the purpled coming from the diverse continents the opportunity to study each other reciprocally.

His reticence was due to the annoyance of feeling himself the object of attention, derived from the appreciation of Pius XII who had judged him

fit to succeed him [1] and gave predictions. “Guiseppe Siri is considered number one by the Italian episcopate at this moment, the maximum expression of the cultural point of view, legal, social and political of an ecclesiastic”, an expert of the Vatican would write. The only obstacle presented was from his age: “This severe man, loved by numerous electors, according to the current evaluations of the roman environment – the expert would continue – has but one defect, he is only fifty-two years old; that is, he would be too young to be a papal candidate”. [2] The annoyance turned itself into nervousness when the archbishop, once in Rome, was selected as a candidate to the papacy [3].

1. “When I understood that Pius XII would want to prepare me for the papacy sending me on a mission to the exterior, as had acted towards him Papa Ratti, I refused other trips. I accepted that one in Belgium in 1958 so as not to always respond negatively”. Interview of cardinal Siri with the author (22/10/1985). It was cardinal Gaetano Cicognani to make circulate the news that Pius XII had indicated as his successors Siri or Ottaviani. B. Lai, *I segreti del Vaticano* cit., p. 30.
2. The eventuality of a long pontificate, in the case [of] Siri being chosen, did create for [C]ardinal Pietro Ciriaci the [essence of the] battle.
3. “I am happy that he get it. He is very down. He read his own name in the papers and he is afraid that people will think of him truly as the future Pope”. Interview with Fr. Giacomo Barabino with the author prior to introducing him to [C]ardinal Siri (18/10/1958). Cfr. B. Lai, *Vaticano sottovoce* cit., p. 282 and *I segreti del Vaticano* cit., p. 30. Giacomo Barabino, now secretary of Siri, is actually bishop of Ventimiglia.

To promote the initiative of Siri were, on one side the Italian cardinals Gaetano Cicognani and Benedetto Aloisi Masella, [and] from the other the Eastern cardinal Ignace Gabriel Tappouni, Patriarch of Antioch[4]. The offers were significant data and reports of the proponents with the members of the Sacred College, who [were] abroad [and] barely had the possibility to go into depth independently [into] the conscience of the Italian confreres. At that time, the friends were for the most part restricted to cardinals, already apostolic nunzios, that, would receive the purple, [and] would become a valuable point of reference for the episcopate of the Country in which they had represented the Holy See: they could accelerate a practice or implement interventions in a Roman Curia dominated by Italians. Cicognani had been in Spain and had been able to count on the relations of brother Amleto, apostolic delegate to Washington. In his turn Aloisi Masella, a diplomat for many years in Latin America, would enjoy the benevolence even of several cardinals, those of which had elected him Camerlengo of the Holy Roman

[4] “After the death of Pius XII cardinal Cicognani, who was secretary, sent me to Siri to offer him the candidacy. Cicognani thought that Siri was the only one who was able to continue Pacelli’s magisterium. Even Aloisi Masella was of the same opinion, even if he might harbour any doubt from the young age of the archbishop from Genoa. Siri refused saying that he was not in good health”. Interview from the archbishop José Sebastian Laboa with the author (10/10/1989).

Church in the course of the first general congregation. An appointment made on the next day of the death of the Pope since Pius XII had left the office vacant that in the period of the conclave assumes the provisional government of the Holy See. The support of the Patriarch Tappouni could be of major significance, [he being] close to Siri from the day in which the Ligurian bishop had exhorted the participants at the reunion of an ecclesiastical disaster (ministry) to not assume tones of snobbish distance towards the Eastern Catholics [5]. Tappouni, much noted for the persecutions immediately under the Ottoman Empire, had a long-standing sodality with the cardinals of France.

Siri rejected the multiple invitations to accept the candidacy, even adding motives of health. A justification that must produce reward in days in which the sudden death of the venerated cardinal Celso Constantini would reduce the number of the electors [6], already diminished from the

[5] Cardinal Tappouni was a man of great leverage. He had been beaten up by a Turk and put in prison. A man of a direct character that harboured a particular sympathy for me. One time, during the assembly of a roman **dicastero**, I said that to deal with Orientals humility is needed. Tappouni, who was participating at that meeting, rose to his feet and came to embrace me saying: ‘Up to now I had not heard words from the son-in-law’. [This] happened after my nomination to cardinal”. Interview from cardinal Siri with the author (28/11/1985).

[6] “More than my friend, Costantini was a friend of my father’s. He had met him and appreciated **le doti**. From time to time he would send him a gift of books”. Interview from cardinal Siri with the author (4/11/1959). [Translator’s Note: This is actually written by Siri in *Mio Padre*.]

predictable absence of the Yugoslav Alojzje Stepimac and of the major Jozsef Mindszenty, the one being subjected to the condemnation being inflicted on him by the communist regime, the other refuged in the diplomatic seat of the United States in Budapest [7]. To reaffirm his position, the Ligurian archbishop avoided making visits to the cardinals, limiting himself to receive whoever wanted to see him and, after the funeral [masses] of Pius XII, [he] came back to Genoa, indifferent to the agreements that were in progress between the members of the Sacred College [8]. He returned to Rome on the immediate eve of the conclave, by coincidence running into the dramatic news of the passing away of the archbishop of Detroit by heart failure, Cardinal Edward Mooney.

In the afternoon of October 24, after the processional entrance of the cardinals into the Sistine Chapel and the closing *with keys* of the doors of the Vatican enclosure reserved for elections, Siri took possession of the

[7] The Hungarian government refused to offer safe passage to Mindszenty, asked for by the United States following a request from the assembly of cardinals.

[8] B. Lai, *I segreti del Vaticano* cit. p. 39

accommodation assigned to him: one of several small rooms made in the attic between the private pontifical apartment and the roof of the apostolic palace. A large space called the “soffitoni”, restored and subdivided by Pius XII just at the end of being utilized in conclaves. His two secretaries accompanied the cardinal, Fr. Mino Pesce and Fr. Giacomo Barabino, even they lodged in the “soffinati” [9]. The distribution of the various rooms and offices had been briefly assigned to bedrooms (the “cells” according to the official denomination of the conclaves) by a draw, following indispensable adjustments [that] had been effected in the days previous. Among the electors, many of which [were] of advanced age, there was the Chilean JoséMaria Caro Rodrigues, who had turned ninety-two years; the Chinese Thomas Thien Ken-sin with his legs in plaster casts as the after effects of an

[9] The poor health conditions of Fr. Pesce, who would die in November 1969, had pushed the archbishop to lighten his work, entrusted in part from 1953 to Fr. Barabino. Either of the two ecclesiastics, also wanting full trust, would go beyond a certain threshold of reservation imposed by the cardinal. “I write letters by myself for only three motives. First: a typist will not be able to become successful engrossed by me. Second: after four or five years I should take a long time to agree [on] a system [of organization]. Third: there would never be a true self-restraint since at least I would be constrained to say to another person how much I have on my mind”. Interview from cardinal Siri with the author (14/11/1959).

accident and the Frenchman Georges Grente who would need continual assistance.

It was in the afternoon hours of that day that the archbishop of Genoa came [to his] seat well-informed of the greatest positions [that] emerged in the two weeks of the pre-conclave. Many candidates [10] were spoken of, but in reality only two cardinals enjoyed a discreet number of preventative consensus: the seventy-seven-year-old Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, Patriarch of Venice [11]; and Gregorio Pietro XV Agagianian, a sixty-three year old born in the Soviet Caucasus [Mountains], Patriarch of the Armenians, [and]

[10] Predictions were concerning Ruffini, Valeri, Aloisi Masella. “But—Pietro Ciriaci would say—the person who is really a candidate is the person to whom any cardinals have determined to give their vote; the person who, designated, accepts or at least lets it be understood to accept a convergence of suffrages on his name. Afterwards it happens that the groups of electors, formed independently, manage in the course of the votings to increase the number of the consents”. B. Lai, *I segreti del Vaticano* cit., p. 29.

[11] Siri would say: “There was a meeting at the *Domus Mariae* at which monsignor Tardini and the designated, that is, cardinal Roncalli, took part. What they have said, what they have done I do not precisely know because I did not go there, I was not invited. I believe that in that [meeting] of which there is talk, (I believe, because it did not interest me to know, nor did I investigate), of how much was said to me, it had been decided to promote the election of Roncalli to the pontificate and of Tardini to Secretary of State. But I do not know how much credibility certain Roman voices had; I believe that it is true and enough”. E. Caveterra, *Il prefetto del Sant’Offizio*, Mursia, Milan 1990, p. 5. The reply is supplied from the letter of 24/10/1958 to the bishop of Faenza Giuseppe Battaglia in which Roncalli would learn [of] arrangements with regard to the nephew, the priest Battista: “When you heard say that I should have given immediately from the Holy Spirit, expressed from the will you reunite, you want to let Fr. Battista come to Rome [...]”. L. F. Capovilla, *Vent’anni*, 28-X-1958/1978, s. e., p. 49.

since a few months the head of the Ministry of the Propaganda Fide. Several electors had not expressed preferences in wait for votings to occur, that were initiated on Sunday, October 25, under the vigilant direction of the deacon of the college of cardinals, the Frenchman Eugenio Tisserant.

Even if numerous offices of the Roman Curia were left without holders, Tisserant had already had to energetically intervene to secure order in the moment of the confused passing of Pius XII at Castel Gandolfo, a residence lacking in the protocol (record keeping) defenses that protected the Pope in the Vatican [12]. A resolute countenance of his maintained inside the conclave for the reason of his deaconate and his experience to have participated at the election of Pius XII. Experience that, lacking some other cardinals, gave place to any problem, like the uncertain colour of the “smoke signal”, neither white nor black, with which the crowd gathering in piazza

[12] Siri would attribute the vacancies of the numerous curatorial positions to the distrust of Pius XII, who “assessed human weaknesses” and did not know how to answer the many aspirants negatively. As many criticisms moved to the deceased Pontiff for being more dedicated to speeches than to relations with the bishops, the cardinal would reply: “These speeches will not be forgotten. First of all, if one of the faithful would ask advice of a parish priest on determining matters, he would not know what to answer him. Today it is enough to take a volume of the papal speeches to find everything there. Pius XII has made the Church carry out an enormous leap”. B. Lai, *Vaticano sottovoce* cit., p. 292.

San Pietro would be signaled the positive or negative results of the counts [13].

Fifty-one cardinals, by two-thirds non-Italians, took three days and eleven counts to elect on the afternoon of October 28 Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, who assumed the name of John XXIII. “In the morning that which had been concluded in the [previous] evening would be undone,” the Irish cardinal John D’Alton would reveal, alluding to the difficulty of converging under one name the thirty-five votes necessary to achieve the prescribed majority [14].

The accord had been rendered arduous by the opposition from those inclined that from the older Patriarch of Venice they would prefer the younger Agagianian. To give confirmation was the same Giovanni XXIII during a visit to the Armenian college, publicly confiding to Agagianian’s presence: Did you know that your cardinal and I were being supported in

[13] Cardinal Siri told of having casually assisted at the small ceremony with which, at the end of all double voting, they proceeded to burn the forms in the chimney of the Sistine Chapel: not any of the cardinals responsible to the aim would worry to put into the chimney the materials necessary to signal the negative outcome of the ballots. B. Lai, *Vaticano aperto* cit., p. 49.

[14] According to a note of the defunct Tisserant on [the subject of] his personal agenda, Roncalli would have received thirty-six votes. “Panorama”, 6 July 1972.

the conclave of last October? Our names were alternating themselves [this] time on [this] time down, like the Czechs in boiling water” [15]. More than one cardinal would lavish himself in making work from persuasion. “Some [of us] have said and have done one thing that has carried the election of John XXIII”, cardinal Pietro Ciriaci would say, alluding to his negative survey about Agagianian at the end of hurrying, in case of election, he who would have left to chance the office of secretary of State [16].

A valid contribution to the choice of the Patriarch of Venice was given even by Siri, from understanding with Tappouni, of which Roncalli would know the friendship with the Genovese prelates [17]. “When everything was finished – Siri admitted – I went to cardinal Tappouni and I asked [for] a cigarette. I have never smoked. He offered me a long and slender cigarette, I believe it might have been oriental” [18].

[15] L. F. Capovilla, *Vent’anni cit.*, p. 25

[16] B. Lai, *I segreti del Vaticano cit.*, p. 39

[17] On December 22, 1954 Cardinal Roncalli would send a photograph of Tappouni, [to Siri] happily pointing out how the purpled Oriental had participated in a solemn ceremony in a cape with the hat “put on crooked”. As. B. Lai, *Vaticano aperto cit.*, p. 39.

[18] “The days that have passed in the conclave have been anything but comfortable. I was very hot in the Sistine [Chapel] and in the adjacent halls, I was cold in the loggias [galleries] and on the stairs. At the end of the ballots, there was crowding in front of the elevators and one would need to wait half an hour to go up to our cells”. Interview from cardinal Siri with the author (4/11/1959).