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In his workshop in Rome by the Vatican, Raniero Mancinelli holds one of the three papal robes that he is preparing for the next pope to wear on the day of his election. (Camillo Barone)



by Camillo Barone

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In the quiet heart of Borgo Pio, a stone's throw from St. Peter's Basilica, is a tiny backroom with two wooden tables, a sewing machine and an old iron. It is here that Raniero Mancinelli, 86, silently sews and cuts the robe that will welcome the new pope at the most intimate and symbolic moment of his election: inside the "room of tears," next to the Sistine Chapel.

"I am making three cassocks of three different sizes, 50, 54 and 58," he told National Catholic Reporter in a slight Roman accent. "I will give them to the cardinals before the conclave begins. It is a gift, as always."

Three white robes, a silk-blend band with golden fringes, and a white papal zucchetto: everything must be ready for when the white smoke signals to the world the election of Pope Francis' successor.

Mancinelli speaks with the confidence of someone who has been sewing the cassocks for popes for more than half a century. He started at the age of 15, side by side with his father.

"I feel normal. This has been my job for 70 years, and I do it with passion. I work with my daughter and with my grandson Lorenzo, who is 23 and is now making a sash for a cardinal. It is a tradition that continues."



In his store in Rome by the Vatican, Raniero Mancinelli works on one of the three papal robes that he is preparing for the next pope to wear on the day of his election. (Camillo Barone)

His small atelier is a time capsule. The walls are papered with photographs in which Mancinelli appears smiling next to the popes he has dressed — John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis. The iron, heavy and blackened, is the same one he has used since 1962. The sewing machine looks like something out of a museum, yet will help create a white cassock destined for one of the most exciting moments in a pope's life.

Mancinelli had a special relationship with Francis.

"Our first sweetest and most beautiful encounter with him, I can never forget. He was friendly, joyful. We seemed like lifelong friends. I met him at least five times. He chose me."

It was in Mancinelli's store more than 30 years ago that Francis bought the iron pectoral cross that he wore until the day he died. An image of that cross is now depicted above his tomb in the Basilica of St. Mary Major.




Pectoral crosses for bishops and cardinals are displayed in Raniero Mancinelli's store in Rome. On the bottom left is a cross with the same design that Pope Francis bought in the store when he was auxiliary bishop in Buenos Aires. An image of that cross is now depicted above his tomb in the basilica of St. Mary Major. (Camillo Barone)

When Francis was elected pope, he wanted to continue to be dressed by Mancinelli. But with a specific request: simplicity.

"Francis did not like expensive things. He wanted simple, durable fabrics, like light wool mixed with terital," Mancinelli said.

Francis' simple lifestyle paved the way for a new understanding of papal elegance. He refused to wear the short, cape-like red mozzetta on the night of his election, appearing that evening of March 13, 2013, in only a white cassock.

Mancinelli has prepared a mozzetta for the new pope, "in case he wants to dress as pope," he said.



Croziers and mitres displayed in Raniero Mancinelli's store in Rome. Mancinelli's clients count more than 2,000 bishops coming from all over the world. (Camillo Barone)



Fabrics and zucchetti for bishops and cardinals are displayed in Raniero Mancinelli's store in Rome. (Camillo Barone)

Mancinelli told NCR about seeing two cardinals in the last few days, one American and one Eastern European, sporting new red cassocks. "I said to them, 'Your Eminence, what if you then become pope?' And they said, 'But no, there's no risk!' " He said he doesn't remember who they were, but maybe, like any good craftsman, he is a keeper of secrets.

In recent days, the workshop has been frequented by cardinals from all over the world. Some for a new collar, some for a button. Mancinelli said no to all: "Let's wait until after the conclave. I wouldn't want one of them to become pope with a newly sewn gold button."

What is certain is that in a few days, when a man walks out onto the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, there will also be a little piece of Mancinelli on his shoulders.

With the same humility with which he sews every hem and measures every buttonhole, Mancinelli said he looks to the future without pretense, but with a gentle hope.

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"I hope I can continue to dress the next pope as well, if I haven't already dressed him."

He smiled as he said this, hinting that the robes of Francis' successor may have already passed through his hands. And then he let slip a remark that is both a joke and a sign of a deep respect earned through years of silent service.

"One of the cardinals once told me, 'I will make you secretary of state if I become pope.' " Even if it doesn't happen, Mancinelli will still have already had his highest title: tailor of history.

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This story appears in the **Who will be the next pope?** and **Pope Leo XIV** feature series.