News



Faithful watch a giant screen showing images of cardinals entering the conclave, in St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican May 7, 2025. (RNS/AP/Andrew Medichini)

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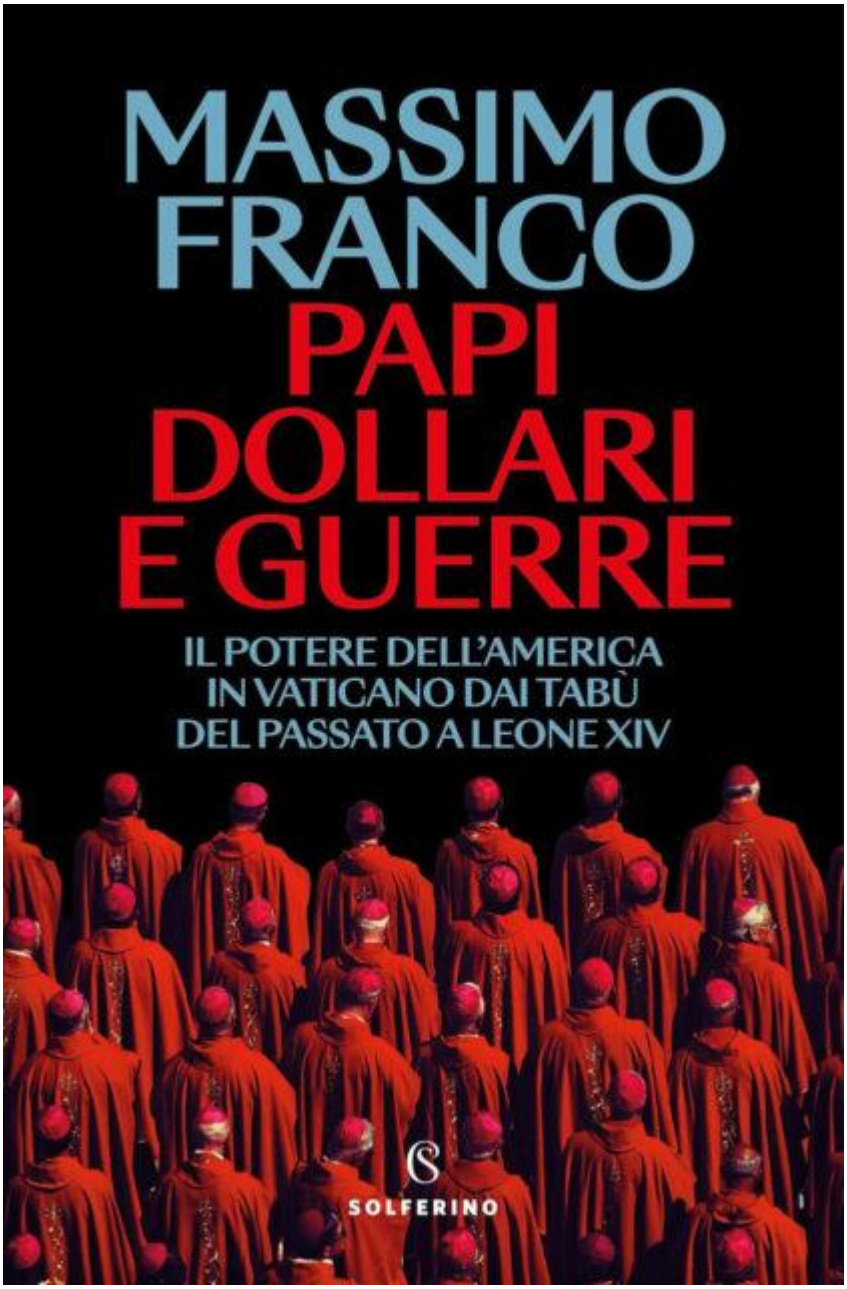
Nearly a year after the conclave that elected Pope Leo XIV, two deeply sourced books offer competing portraits of the context and maneuvering behind the first U.S.-born pope's election.

Popes, Dollars and Wars, by renowned Italian journalist Massimo Franco, traces how the church in the United States, long treated in Rome as a periphery of the Catholic Church, became a force to be reckoned with in the centuries-old institution. Published on March 31, it is currently only available in Italian.

Franco's book relies on research and never-before-seen documents scavenged from the bunker of the Vatican's own secret archives, now called the Pontifical Apostolic Archive, with the guidance of its former prefect, Bishop Sergio Pagano. The documents show how decades of U.S. money, millionaire donors and fundraising cardinals made a pope from the U.S. increasingly plausible.

The second book, *The Election of Pope Leo XIV: The Last Surprise of Pope Francis*, by veteran Vatican reporters and power couple Elisabetta Piqué (of Argentina's La Nación newspaper) and Gerard O'Connell (of the U.S.-based Jesuit America magazine), delves into their accounts of the conclave. Published last month, it's a deep dive into the events preceding the pope's election, with exclusive interviews and insights with thought leaders and kingmakers in the conclave.

Both books rely heavily on unnamed sources — unsurprising in a Vatican culture where discretion and curial favor often outweigh transparency.

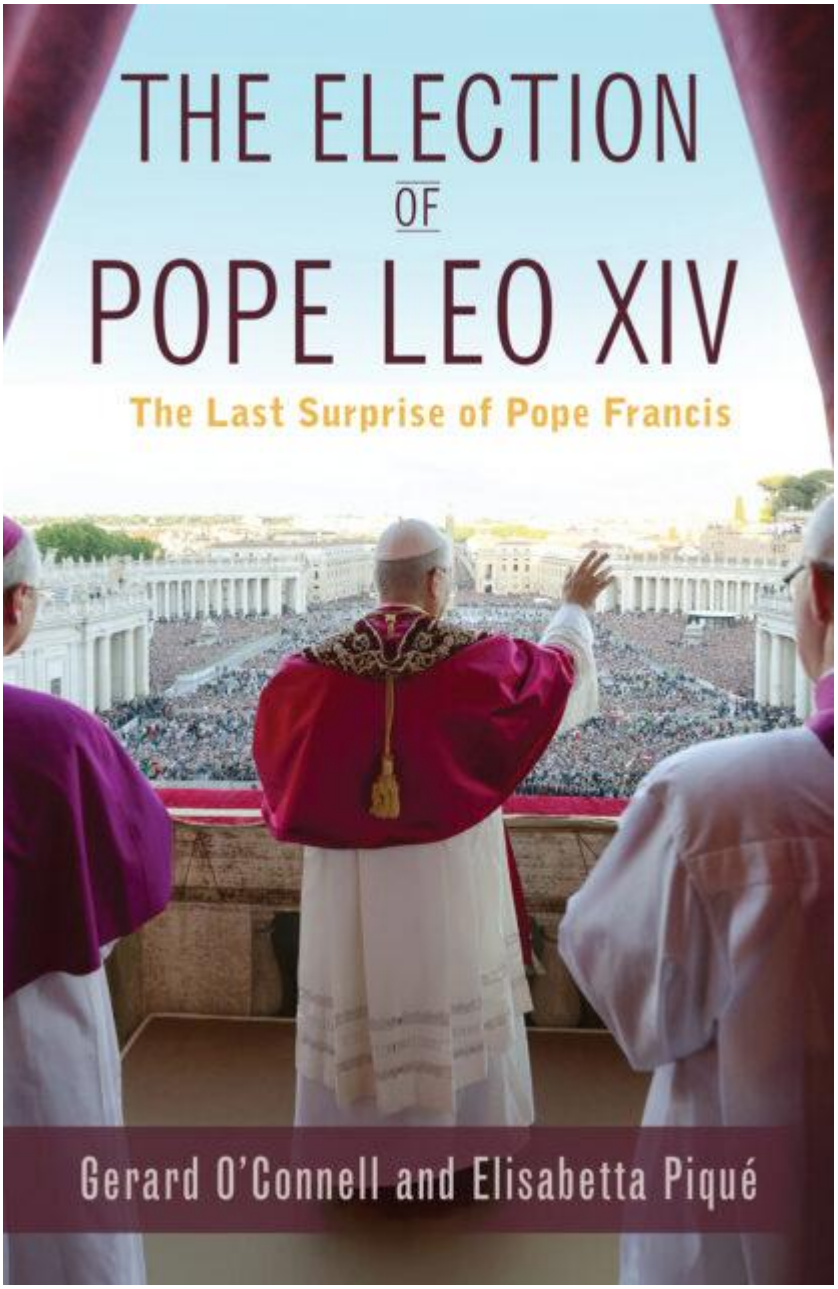


"Popes, Dollars and Wars" by Massimo Franco

After Pope Francis' death on April 21, 2025, cardinals from around the world gathered in Rome for the general congregations, the closed-door meetings that set the stage for the conclave. As Piqué and O'Connell wrote, conservative cardinals who opposed aspects of Francis' papacy made forceful speeches calling for doctrinal clarity and a return to tradition. At the same time, cardinals from across the globe were looking for a pastor close to ordinary Catholics in troubled times.

But the most decisive conversations happened outside the Vatican over private dinners in cardinals' residences. Franco takes readers inside the Pontifical North American College, or NAC, the seminary on Rome's Janiculum Hill where future U.S. church leaders are trained and where 8 of the 10 American cardinal electors stayed during the conclave.

In the NAC's "Red Room," named for its scarlet velvet chairs and portraits of influential cardinals on the walls, the cardinals met to discuss the future of the papacy. "During conversations around the rectangular table of the Red Room dining hall," Franco wrote, "the differences among the leaders of the episcopacy were smoothed over."



"The Election of Pope Leo XIV: The Last Surprise of Pope Francis" by Gerard O'Connell and Elisabetta Piqué

Related: What a new book tells us about the conclave that elected Pope Leo

Then-New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, close to Republican circles and a leading figure in The Papal Foundation, an American charity supporting papal initiatives around the world, played a central role, according to Franco. Founded by John Paul II, the foundation has raised an estimated $250 million and was especially relevant as cardinals discussed Vatican financial scandals and deficits ahead of the conclave.

"It is said that the traditionalists, including Dolan, were aiming for a solid conservative like the Archbishop of Budapest, Péter Erdő," who is considered close to former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Franco wrote.

Support for Erdő was strong among conservatives, especially in the United States. Brian Burch, the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, spoke favorably of him, as did Cardinal Gerhard Müller, a frequent Mar-a-Lago visitor and vocal Francis critic often featured on EWTN.

U.S. journalists Edward Pentin and Diane Montagna were accused of trying to sway cardinals by giving them a book titled *The College of Cardinals' Report,* describing where cardinals stood on hot-button issues such as female ordination and the welcoming of LGBTQ Catholics.

President Donald Trump publicly backed Dolan for pope and later posted an AI-generated picture of himself dressed as pope. An unnamed source "in contact with the cardinals" told Piqué that "Trump dressed as pope wasn't a joke" but a message: "I'm watching you and I want a domesticated Catholic Church."

But the U.S.-led conservative push had the opposite effect: quietly consolidating support for a dark-horse candidate, Cardinal Robert Prevost — the Chicago-born head of the Vatican's Dicastery for Bishops.

During "secret dinners" co-hosted by British Ambassador to the Holy See Chris Trott and Cardinal Vincent Nichols, archbishop of Westminster, brought together 14 cardinals of the British Commonwealth. Some of them had worked with Prevost and liked his style, and were ready to put their weight behind him, Piqué and O'Connell wrote.

"We learn that some of Prevost's early supporters for the papacy came from the group of twenty-three cardinal electors who are part of the thirty-plus-member Dicastery for Bishops," a group, the authors added, that regularly met at the Vatican. Among them was Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago, who had known Prevost for many years.



Cardinal Pietro Parolin, center, greets Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo during a final Mass celebrated by cardinals inside St. Peter's Basilica, before the conclave to elect a new pope at the Vatican May 7, 2025. (RNS/AP/Gregorio Borgia)

At the residence of German Cardinal Reinhard Marx, referred to as "Casa Marx" (The Marx Home), cardinals met to "discuss the qualities of the next pope and Prevost's candidacy," Piqué and O'Connell wrote. "There are also some non-bishops — men and women — working in the Roman Curia who are actively seeking to convince the Latin American electors that Prevost is the best choice," the authors added, citing Emilce Cuda, the first female secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, and Cardinal Carlos Gustavo Castillo Mattasoglio, archbishop of Lima, Peru.

Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron organized two meals around the time of Francis' funeral with Andrea Riccardi, the founder of the powerful Catholic movement the Community of Sant'Egidio, which allegedly supported progressive French Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline as the next pope, the authors wrote.

Both books show that Italians hoping to reclaim the papacy failed to unite behind one candidate.

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin entered the conclave as the favorite, but his lack of pastoral experience made progressives wary, while conservatives mistrusted him for his role in drafting a controversial deal with China that gave Beijing power in the selection of bishops.

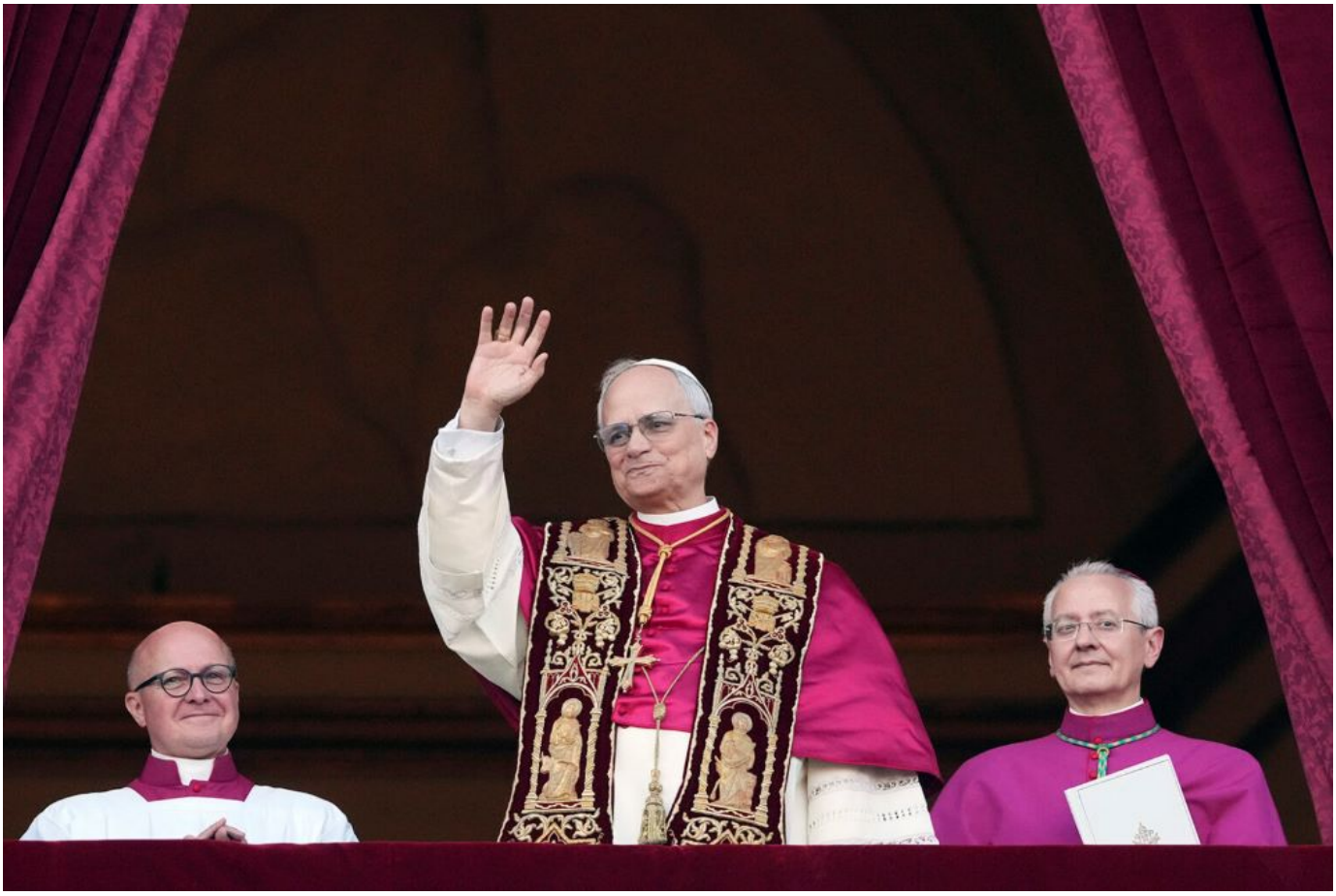
In the days leading up to the conclave, Piqué and O'Connell published reports suggesting that the secretary of state was at odds with Francis, which some said was the "nail in the coffin" for Parolin's chances of becoming pope.

In their book, Piqué and O'Connell bring readers inside the conclave, detailing mundane and extraordinary events within the secretive election, including the discovery of an active cellphone — which cardinals are banned from having during the conclave — in the pocket of an older cardinal.

On the first vote, only three cardinals received between 20 and 30 votes: Erdő, Prevost and Parolin. The strong support for Erdő "shows (the conservatives) were well organized," O'Connell wrote.

The second vote showed a significant shift, with Erdő losing several votes. "Prevost is the main beneficiary," O'Connell wrote.

Dolan later recounted that on the morning of the second day of voting, he shared some peanut butter and jelly with Prevost and got to know the Chicago-born cardinal better.



Cardinal Robert Prevost appears on the central loggia of St. Peter’s Basilica after being chosen the 267th pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church, choosing the name of Pope Leo XIV, at the Vatican May 8, 2025. (RNS/AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

Five of the more conservative U.S. cardinals were skeptical of Prevost, whom they viewed as a more moderate version of Francis. But those differences were smoothed out during the conclave, according to an unnamed cardinal cited in Franco's book.

By the third vote, Parolin and Aveline were still in the running, but the papacy was only a few votes away for Prevost. "It was very clear that we were moving in a direction that was probably unstoppable," Cupich would later tell O'Connell in an interview.

Pope Leo was elected on the fourth vote, having appeased conservatives but without winning over some members of the Curia.

O'Connell reports a telling moment after Leo was announced as pope. Curial officials expecting to celebrate Parolin's election were "stunned, frozen, defeated," he wrote. "But a monsignor tries to react positively: '*Lo faremo uno di noi*' (We will make him

one of us),' he remarks, trying to raise their spirits."

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Franco's book also includes a previously unreported meeting in June between the Chinese delegation and the Vatican, roughly one month after Leo's election. He wrote that the "delegation left Rome unconvinced and decided to not make a rash judgment," suggesting that relations with Beijing will likely continue to be a persistent challenge for the new papacy.

Piqué and O'Connell claim that it was ultimately Francis' shaping of the College of Cardinals that led to Leo's election. "Francis could not choose his successor, but he created the conditions that made Leo's election possible," the authors wrote. "It was his last surprise."

For Franco, Leo's election "allows the Vatican to play on an ever-evolving international chess board" as a credible advocate for peace. "It will be promoted by a church that will have to reconcile with itself, before reconciling with the rest of the world," he wrote. "From this perspective, the first geopolitical challenge of the U.S. papacy will be the ghost of its own divisions."