

rusalem to Gaza and, finding that this man had received the grace to believe in Jesus, baptized him at a wayside well. After that Philip disappeared, and the official continued on his way. But now he was a living member of the Church of Christ, a participant in the Mystical Body of Christ, as surely as any Christian of a thousand years later who was baptized in one of Europe's cathedral baptisteries and had his name registered as an official member of the visible Church structure to be found everywhere around the cathedral.

But for that Ethiopian official there was no visible Church structure. Actually, by that simple ceremony of entering the wayside stream with the Apostle Philip and accepting baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, that official had joined an underground, the nascent Christian underground, against which already the first pogroms had been launched by the resident Jewish authorities headed by a fiery rabbinical zealot named Saul of Tarsus, who, in the words of the same chapter of the Acts of the Apostles that tells of the Ethiopian's baptism, "wreaked havoc on the Church, entering into every house, and dragging men and women out and throwing them into prison."

For however or wherever the Church founded by Christ survives and lives on, it is sure that it will live on; the whole brute strength of Hell will not prevail against it. And the successor of Peter, whoever he is during those dire days, will finally be converted and will, as Jesus foretold after his resurrection, restore and bring back to spiritual strength the faith of his bishops and people in the Church of Christ.

36. Scenario: *The Consistory*

It was the first time and, although no one there quite realized it, the last time these particular 153 men would assemble together in the second-floor auditorium of the Nervi Hall of Audiences in Rome and sit down together facing Papa Valeska: a small sea of cardinalial blood purple

wreathing the hemicycle of tiers undulating and spiraling down around the narrow dais where that lone white-robed figure sat as a gleaming and immovable rock on which all waves could fall, falter, break and dissolve into receding rivulets of foam. Not for nothing had Christ anciently renamed Simon as Peter.

The Pope's peremptory, tight-lipped summons to his Consistory—"I wish to speak with all my cardinals privately"—had made no bureaucratic distinction between active and retired cardinals, and no legalistic distinction between voting (under eighty years of age) and nonvoting cardinals (over eighty). "Neither bureaucracy nor legalism has any place in my Consistory." Every cardinal was to come. And in full-dress regalia. They had all come. Whatever their motives might have been—sense of duty, curiosity, fear, hope, force of habit, devotion, ambition, opportunism, love—none of the cardinals boycotted Valeska's Consistory.

This was surprising, seeing that no precise information was available about *what* the Holy Father had in mind; and the usually informative in-house Vatican sources could honestly supply only a sincere "Nobody knows" to all the discreet inquiries made beforehand. All anyone knew was what the papal summons said: "This Consistory will be under the protection of the Precious Blood of Our Savior guaranteeing the Keys of the Kingdom." This appeared to many as the typical language of "Rome" when speaking of subjects as wide-ranging as Peter's Pence, the Vatican budget deficit, papal teaching about the Holy Trinity or in-vitro fertilization techniques. The major world media had described the forthcoming Consistory with the stock explanation that "an imminent reorganization of Vatican finances is expected," or "consistories have a long and ancient history in the Church of Rome." The consensus among the anti-Church partisans was definitely minimalist. "Probably another semipublic meditation on the Blessed Virgin according to the Pope's personal devotion"—that was the most pitying guess about the subject on the Holy Father's mind. The soundest reaction came from retired nonagenarian Luis Cardinal Silva, who, with crackling bones, had risen from his invalid's bed in Valparaiso, Chile, muttering to his horrified but helpless nurses: "This is it! I've got to go! It's an ending or it's a beginning. I've got to be there! At last that young man is going to do something! Maybe!"

So, on this July 1, the feast day of the Most Precious Blood of Jesus, just two days after the feast day of Sts. Peter and Paul, the Founding Apostles of the Pope's Roman See, all Valeska's cardinals were present. But from the very moment of their arrival at the Nervi Hall, it was clear that this Consistory was not going to resemble any Consistory in living memory.

First of all, security was at its tightest. The approaches to the Nervi were guarded by Italian police armed with automatic weapons. Around the main doors of the hall, a detachment of stalwart Swiss Guards formed a gauntlet of security through which those entering passed in single file. Without proper documents, Sts. Peter and Paul themselves would not have been admitted past those two checkpoints.

Inside, there was a novelty. The lobbies, the elevators and the stairs were manned by what seemed to be a small army of uniformed and bemedaled military men. True, they carried no visible sidearms. But each one wore a sword, and their seriousness and gravity and formal manners suggested men under strict orders. Upstairs in the auditorium, each cardinal was escorted to his place, where a small printed bulletin carrying the golden embossment of the Crossed Keys and Tiara informed him that the Holy Father would address his cardinals at 9:00 A.M. The television and radio booths were occupied by those same military types, as was the back landing of the auditorium.

Of course, the cardinals recognized (some more quickly than others) the uniforms and insignia of the Sovereign Order of the Knights of Malta. That solemnizing fact—you couldn't but be impressed by the formality created by the Knights—together with the bareness of the bulletin notice, induced a quietude among the cardinals in which a low whispering was their loudest sound even before Valeska had entered.

The audience of cardinals had been even further muted into quietude by the way Papa Valeska had entered and opened the proceedings. He had been escorted into the auditorium promptly at 8:55 A.M. without fanfare, without any preceding warning except what that bulletin announced. He carried a single folder, did not look to right or left, took his seat, opened the folder, fingered a few pages thoughtfully, took out a ballpoint pen to make a note or two, put down the pen, and looked up for the first time at his audience. All present realized there was to be no opening hymn to the Holy Spirit, no formal introduction of the Holy Father. Papa Valeska could have been the chairman of the board, come to deliver an annual report.

Only a few popes—and those in modern times—have ever had to face an audience of over one hundred cardinals; and Papa Valeska was the first pope in history who sat down facing 153 of them. He knew them all, of course: about half of them better than the others, and about a dozen quite intimately. With some he had had deeply satisfying conversations, with others more than one head-on collision, with still others a prickly relationship made possible only because of an implicitly accepted cold distance between him and them. He was loved by some, not loved but

all the same respected by some, and cordially disliked by some. Only a few had gone on record as hating him. He never had any real difficulty with those; he knew where he stood with them.

But with about half a dozen he always felt profoundly uneasy: those who never violated any rules of conventional respect, papal protocol and ordinary civility but who behind an artful mask of good behavior—even of ecclesiastical bonhomie—could not wait to see his pontificate over and done with. That form of contempt hurt Valeska profoundly.

“May Jesus be praised,” Papa Valeska started, his voice low-toned, his pace deliberate. He glanced at his notes, reading a text he obviously knew very well, because he continually lifted his eyes to look at the cardinals while continuing uninterruptedly with his flow of words.

“Those were the first words I addressed to the Church and the world on the night of my election. May they be fulfilled in us today at this Consistory.” His whole manner bespoke some terrible deliberacy of mind; and the hint of that maintained the tension in his listeners.

“What I have to say to you today will not take much time. We will be short in words but hopefully long and deep in our understanding.

“There can be no genuine doubt in anybody’s mind about two aspects of the Church Universal today.” The closed-circuit television cameras panned over the faces of the cardinals, all of them, willy-nilly, hanging on what this one man, the Pope, had to say.

“Since the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, there has been a radical change effected in liturgy, theology, piety, morals and ecclesial government—in barely thirty years!” Valeska himself could feel the sudden tension among whole groups of cardinals at these words. He went on calmly. “The Roman Catholic institutional organization of the forties and fifties of this century resembled the Roman Catholic institutional organization of the 1500s—even that of the 1300s—far more closely than the current ‘Conciliar Church’ resembles that of the forties and fifties. So great a chasm of difference in such a short time! So violently rapid a change!

“Second, throughout every region and in every department of Roman Catholic life today there is an inescapable and continuous slippage into disorder, disunity, confusion, unfaith and open apostasy. It is a rampant decadence everywhere, sparing nobody and no element—seminaries, diocesan and Roman chanceries, religious orders, male and female, schools, colleges, universities, families, our liturgy, our theology, our morality, our devotions, our missions in Africa and Asia, our personal standards. Everything about us has been affected by this slippage.

“At the beginning of my pontificate, in full recognition of these two

vital aspects, my general policy was one of waiting, of patience, of forbearance, of encouragement. The gargantuan changeover consequent on the Second Vatican Council had, I reasoned, produced a temporary imbalance. Church members, both clergy and laity, would in time recover their Roman Catholic balance, I argued with myself. There would be a turnaround, I forecast, a moment when the organization would be set aright again. I was sure of it.

"Above all, I was thinking of you, Venerable Brothers. You form my papal subsidiarity; through you, I am supposed to guide and govern the Church. That action of rebalancing matters in the Church must, therefore, come primarily from you, under my papal authority, and thus filter down the ranks and echelons of the hierarchy to the level of the ordinary clergy and the people.

"This was my understanding. That was my policy. This understanding was inaccurate. That policy was faulty. There has been no turnaround, no sign of any rebalancing. I know it. You know it.

"Look at what we together have wrought—this 'Conciliar Church' of ours. Look at it in the broad view, not concentrating on the individual debilitating agencies now corroding its vitals. Leave all details aside, and see the big picture.

"In our laissez-faire management, we have nourished an institutional organization of people and material which every year becomes less and less recognizable as Roman Catholic. Overall, the pressure on us has been to fuse with the ever-changing backgrounds of human cultures; to accept the modern attitude that, in the words of one neopagan philosopher, 'Our brains are stargates, our bodies cells of mystery' to be explored, to thus attain 'citizenship in a world larger than our aspirations, more complex than all our dreams.' In sum, to mix into the world around us to the point of invisibility for Catholicism.

"This is what we have wrought. This is our 'Conciliar Church' today. Look, please, in the mirror I am holding up for us all to gaze in, for you as my bishops and prelates, for me as your Pope, so that once, just this once, we acknowledge the truth of our situation to ourselves and to our God.

"In the Gospel of the love of Jesus Christ, there is one terrible scene that has struck fear into my soul. Share it with me, because it concerns you as my bishops and me as your Pope." Valeska pulled a small copy of the New Testament from his pocket, and stood up while rummaging through the pages. "It's described in Luke . . . yes, Luke . . . here it is!" By this time he had strolled to one end of the dais.

"So! It was the night before he died . . . the Last Supper . . . all the

disciples around him"—scanning the text as he spoke. "The traitor Judas had left the Supper Room: Satan, Luke says, had entered into Judas' heart, even though he was one of the Twelve Apostles, and he leaves on the nefarious business of betraying the Lord Jesus." Valeska raised his eyes and looked at the cardinals nearest him. "Even though he was one of the Twelve Apostles." He repeated the words with a look of astonishment on his face.

Scanning the Gospel text again: "Then our Lord consecrated the bread and the wine . . . all the Apostles received it from his hands . . . and then they had a dispute—the Apostles—as to which of them was really the greatest. . . . Jesus rebuked them, assuring them that they all would be important personages in his Kingdom . . . then, answering their question about who would be or was the leader and the greatest among them, he indicated Simon Peter and . . . yes, here he speaks to them all, putting Simon Peter first: 'Simon, Simon, look. Satan has desired to sieve all of you like wheat.' Jesus says that to all of the Apostles listening to him, just as Jesus now says it to all of you listening to me." Now Valeska was looking around the tiers.

"All of you. Satan wanted to separate you all away from the golden grain, the Bread of Life, turn you into worthless chaff, have you thrown into the fires of the eternal furnace." There was no sound from that audience. One Eminence wet his lips. Another Eminence ran his index finger around his collar to free it from the perspiration on his neck.

Valeska looked down at his text. " 'But,' Jesus went on, now speaking exclusively to Simon Peter, 'I have prayed for you.' " Valeska's voice slowed and thickened with feeling. " 'I have prayed for you that you not lose your faith.' " Valeska choked on those last three words. He stood there, head bowed, for some seconds; then, laying his little New Testament on the counter, he sank slowly to his knees. This action produced consternation among the cardinals.

Most of them did not know what to do. Here and there around the tiers, a sprinkling of figures rose to their feet, scarlet exclamation points. Then one after the other, and in twos and threes, the generality stood up. About forty or fifty remained frozen in their seats, shooting glares—nervous, resentful, questioning—at each other. Those standing could not kneel. Those sitting could not bring themselves to stand once they had obviously refused to imitate the generality. Frankevic, the papal secretary, and an irascible papal aide, Father O'Donnell, viewing the event on closed-circuit television upstairs in Valeska's study, quickly scribbled down the names of the seated cardinals.

"The idiots," O'Donnell said in his nervy way. "They've shown their hand!"

"No, Father Joe." Frankevic was smiling grimly. "They were caught off balance. He caught them. Their hatred was stronger than their prudence. Evil will out!"

Valeska found his voice. "Those words, Venerable Brothers, are addressed to me, not to you. For I am Peter today." The words came out of that bowed kneeling figure as if marinated in some deep inner anguish. "The Lord Jesus prayed for me that I not lose my faith." There was a slight pause. "I have a confession to make, Venerable Brothers, and a pardon to ask." The image of kneeling Pope and listening cardinals coming to Frankevic and O'Donnell on the closed circuit might as well have been a still photograph in color, and not a live transmission, so immobile were all the figures for about twenty seconds. No standing cardinal swayed on his feet. No seated cardinal stirred.

"Satan, the Enemy, tried to sieve me like chaff, whether in India or in Italy or in the U.S.A. or in Africa or in Latin America or back home here beside the Tomb of the Apostles. He sieved me. He shook me. He confused me. He led me to commit errors of practical judgment. He made me deaf to the protests of the faithful. He made me vulnerable to the half-lies, the wheedling half-truths, the pleas of hypocrites, the soft talk of those who hated me as Peter's successor.

"*Mea culpa! Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!*" Valeska struck his breast with his fist. "It was my own fault. It was my weakness. It was my own fault, my own fault." The voice trailed away into the silence of a few moments. Then, not abruptly, but slowly, he rose to his feet, one hand grazing across his eyes to brush away the tears that blinded him, and muttered almost inaudibly, "At times, only tears . . . only tears, Lord, will suffice . . . only tears."

He started walking back to his chair at the center of the dais, his voice picking up more firmness and volume. "Saint Luke goes on with the rest of the Lord's words to Simon Peter. 'When you, Simon, return once more to the faith, you will restore the strength of faith to your brothers.' " He paused and turned his head, craning around to look up at the cardinals. "Please sit down!" He waited while the standing cardinals took their seats; but he could not see the stony looks of disapproval, anger and threat that some of those cardinals threw at those who had remained seated. Everyone concentrated now on Valeska.

He had stopped walking by then, and turned to face his audience. "No matter what the personal sins and failings of Peter's successors, they remain Peter's successors, sole possessors on earth of the Keys of the Kingdom, who are solely ensured against any misuse of those keys by the blood of Our Lord Jesus.

"The Keys of this Blood." Valeska repeated the phrase, letting his voice

linger over each syllable. "The Keys of this Blood." He was regaining his composure and a greater control over his thoughts and delivery.

"My own conscience, and the intelligence available to me as universal pastor, has driven me, willy-nilly, to adopt a plan—I know it will be called the Papal Plan in the popular media—for at least facing the dire situation in which the institutional organization finds itself today."

He walked the short distance to his chair and sat down, turning several pages of his notes until he reached the place he was seeking. "That dire situation throws one grave question in my face: How much longer must I wait? How low can I allow our condition to sink? How low is too low?"

Valeska stood up and closed his folder. "Unless I wish to betray my papal oath, I have to take action. I have to say: This is far enough, low enough. At this point, we fight. Hence"—he looked for a long few moments at the folder, then began again—"hence, the Papal Plan.

"Here in Rome, there will be six new Congregations, all of them granted an interim existence, each one possessing absolute powers, all of them reporting directly to me. Each one will supervise one area of Church structure that needs drastic and immediate reform: Bishops, Religious Orders, Priests, Ecumenism, Diocesan Organizations, the Mass. Besides being endowed with absolute powers of excommunication, suspension and interdict, these interim Congregations will have at their disposal three organizations, two already familiar—the Legionnaires of Christ and the Personal Prelature commonly called the *Opus Dei*—and a third, which has already been established and exists on a worldwide basis but hitherto has remained in total secret.

"These Congregations will supersede any existing Roman Congregation—for instance, the present Congregations for Religious and for Bishops will cease to function until further notice.

"Now, exhaustive lists have been compiled. Let me just read you the main ones. There are, first of all, five important ones: cardinals, bishops, priests, seminary professors and theologians. Those whose names appear on those lists have a common fate: They will be automatically retired, stripped of any canonical authorization to function, and left free to pursue life as they see fit.

"There is, then, a second series of lists, covering such changes as the transfer of certain cardinals, the abolition of certain religious orders and congregations, both of men and of women, parishes and dioceses placed under interdict until priests, bishops, and layfolk return to Catholic practice.

"It has required a Herculean labor on the part of my collaborators to assemble the names of thousands of retired priests, retired bishops and

retired theologians who will immediately replace those who are forcibly retired by papal decree.

"You will discover, in time, that there is a series of particular papal decrees. The principal ones should be mentioned here. There has been in the past and there will be in the future one official Roman Rite of the Mass. For the foreseeable future, there will be two officially sanctioned variations of that sacred Roman Rite: the traditional one that flourished for over a thousand years before the Council of Trent gave it a special cachet; and the *Novus Ordo* of Pope Paul VI, which, in a reformed state, is also authorized. Both will be said in Latin, as the Second Vatican Council decreed, except for vernacular prayers said by the people. The Pauline *Novus Ordo* will be purified of its suspect parts, the validating words of Consecration restored to it and, completely purged from it, Luther's additions. Performance of either Mass is decided not by a popular vote but by direct orders from the Holy See. All ecclesiastical sanctions launched against the so-called Traditionalist movements and leaders are hereby revoked. Anyway, most of them were null and void from the beginning.

"Another decree suspends all activities of the Justice and Peace Commission and all offices for ecumenism throughout the Church; and still another decree forbids any further use of both the infamous RENEW program and the RCIA program. These have to be suppressed as un-Catholic.

"There is already established a papal commission for a reexamination of the documents of the Second Vatican Council; its decrees will give the authentic interpretation of those documents, once and for all. I myself will be issuing a series of papal decrees about religious liberty, about the one, true Church as the only means of salvation, and about papal infallibility.

"A special *Motu Proprio* of mine will suspend all meetings and activities of all Bishops' Conferences, local and regional. This whole initiative of Bishops' Conferences has proved to be a seedbed of heresy, schism and theological error; and it has been one of the chief instruments in the hands of the anti-Church partisans in their quest to depapalize the Roman Catholic institutional organization.

"Lastly, there is the question of correcting and reformulating the attitude of the Roman Catholic worldwide organization and institution to the modern world. Unfortunately, what the Second Vatican Council stated in this regard was modeled on what Pope Paul VI formulated. Unfortunately, that Pontiff's formulation was fashioned for him by men of the Vatican and men and women outside the Vatican who had one

aim and one aim only: to liquidate the essence of Catholicism and make our human organization of this Church the handmaiden of total secularization of Roman Catholicism. This attitude—already widespread and accepted by bishops, priests, religious and layfolk—must be purged from the Church.

“Your Eminences will be the first to receive all the relevant documents of my Papal Plan. But for the moment, the preceding explanations will suffice.

“Venerable Brothers, all I have outlined may sound like strong medicine. If you think that, you think accurately. It is strong medicine for the virulent disease slowly eating the vitals of the Church Universal.”

Valeska was now gathering his papers into the folder. The cardinals were very quiet, most of them still under the impact of the Pontiff's words, some of them trying to answer the all-important question: What changes does this new attitude of this Pope augur in this Pope's foreign policy? One or two felt like asking the question in the silence that followed Valeska's abrupt ending, but they thought better of it.

“Leave them hanging in that wind, Holy Father,” Frankevic said under his breath up in the study. “Let them swing a little in the winds of doubt and uncertainty.”

The same thought was on Valeska's mind, but he thought better of it. About to turn on his heel and depart, he stopped. “I should perhaps add two further points, very briefly,” he said. He put down his folder and folded his arms.

“I would remind Your Eminences that, as Pope, I hold the Keys of this Sacred Blood, and that the Holy See can wait and wait and wait and wait. For as long as is necessary. If I depart this life, when I depart this life, my successor here will wait and wait and wait. What power on earth can wait like that? Which of Your Eminences or of my bishops can wait as long as that? The strength of those Keys will never weaken. The perfection of that Blood will never be diluted.

“I am now proceeding to the Basilica. I expect all of you to join me there in silent prayer.” Before his audience had realized what was happening, he had traversed the distance between his place on the dais and the exit, and was disappearing between four security men.

Some twenty minutes later, the last of Their Eminences straggled into the Basilica by the main doors and were motioned reverentially but firmly by security guards to travel up all 630 feet of the nave toward the central place of the Basilica, where the 449-foot-long transept crosses the nave. There the High Altar stands facing east beneath Bernini's all-bronze

canopy. In front of the altar is the circular marble balustrade and staircase leading down to an ancient chapel that holds the bronze sarcophagus of Simon Peter. This whole section of the Basilica is called the Confession of St. Peter, because the band of Greek and Latin inscriptions running around the upper walls there records Simon Peter's confession: "You are Christ, the Son of the Living God. . . ."

Even from the main doors and up that enormous nave, the entering cardinals could see the white-robed figure: Frozen by the distance, it seemed dimly to be draped on the balustrade because of the whiteness of that beautiful marble. Actually, Papa Valeska was kneeling there, his cupped hands, fingers intertwined with a Rosary, resting on the balustrade, his eyes fixed on Canova's kneeling statue of Pope Pius VI, who, the most recent pope to be kidnapped, was taken into exile, held prisoner for four years by the dictators of the French Republic, and died in a miserable barracks room of the citadel of Valence, France, in 1802, far from the Tomb of the Apostles.

The moment Valeska had entered the Basilica, all security walkie-talkies rattled with the red-alert code: "The dove is loose! The dove is loose!" A cordon of security guards appeared as if by magic and ringed around the Confession, surrounding Valeska. All exit and entry points of the Basilica were barred and heavily guarded.

Three jeeploads of armed carabinieri tore at breakneck speed across St. Peter's Square and screeched to a halt outside the main doors of the Basilica. The command helicopter appeared, slowly circling above the Basilica, the sharpshooters balancing at its doors and watching with readied weapons. Plainclothes police, male and female, circulated among the people caught in the Basilica by the security emergency. Behind the cordon, the chance pilgrims and visitors, speaking a babel of languages, gathered quickly, eyeing this unannounced event and wondering what was happening.

For some of the cardinals, the walk up that nave was the longest walk of their lives. They knew that place quite well, knew all the hoary memories clinging to its walls. They also knew this Pope. They had learned to expect two things from him: a deluge of well-chosen words and a panoply of gestures heavily laden with symbolism. They had just had one half hour's deluge of those words. Now surely must come the symbolism in gesture.

One by one, or in small groups, some with muttered complaints, some wearing a quiet but obvious air of resentment, one or two with barely suppressed small supercilious smiles, the cardinals arrived at the Confession; and eventually all but a dozen sank gingerly and awkwardly to their knees on the marble intarsia around the balustrade. That holdout dozen

bunched together to one side, carrying on a staccato conversation in whispers. They had gone along, noblesse oblige, with the farce of the so-called Consistory. Stone-faced security officers informed them they could not leave the Basilica or exit from the security cordon. They were prisoners; but they had no obligation and certainly no intention of following the lead of this Polish Bishop, as if they were nothing more than a bunch of junior seminarians flocking docilely on the heels of their spiritual director.

But they especially, as well as some others, were severely shaken by old and cranky Luis Cardinal Silva. They could not take their eyes off him. He was ludicrous, and he was a reproach to them. Silva was last in. He made his way slowly, laboriously, agonizingly, pausing every two or three steps, glaring at the cardinals in his way, breathing heavily and talking to himself, eventually reaching the balustrade. He could not kneel down. So he leaned his aching frame on the balustrade to Valeska's right and buried his face in his hands. Silva was crying quietly, unashamedly, as if he were totally alone, as only an old man can do with an inviolable sense of privacy.

Frankevic arrived at the tail end of all of them. He stood at the very back, inside the cordon, keeping his eyes on that motionless white-robed kneeling figure surrounded by a ragged semicircle sea of purple. After a while, as the minutes passed, the secretary relaxed, staring pointedly at the standing cardinals as if each one of them was an unhealthy excrescence, and praying. Surely some of these Eminences will get the Holy Father's message and meaning—this was his prayer. But his attention was mainly held by the kneeling cardinals.

He noted any and all of their movements, and where their heads turned, and who signaled to whom and what they were signaling. Yes, Frankevic concluded, at least some of them were slowly putting it all together, letting their surroundings and what they had just been told by Valeska sink into their spirits.

There was no escape from the significance of their surroundings: The kneeling statue of that worthy but worldly Pope whose physical beauty was ruined by hardship and whose pride was humbled by imprisonment and death in the contemptuous hands of his mortal enemies. The flickering lights of the ninety-five lamps that burn night and day around the entrance to the Tomb of the Apostles. The four massive ninety-five-foot-long bronze pillars, containing the bones of 31,000 ancient Roman martyrs and sustaining the 700-ton weight of Bernini's canopy, brooding over the majesty of the High Altar. Above it all, the band of black lettering in Greek and Latin running around the upper walls and announcing Christ's momentous supreme choice in answer to Peter's confession of

faith: "You are Peter. Upon this rock, I will build my Church. And the Gates of Hell will not prevail against it. . . ."

But after some ten minutes, Frankevic began to worry: How would or could all this be ended decorously, fittingly? He need not have worried.

Eventually, the silent posture of Pope and cardinals affected the onlookers behind the cordon of security guards. It was a group of German pilgrims who first broke into a softly sung version of the old Catholic hymn "Salve Regina," the medieval world's universally known and loved canticle of praise and supplication to the Virgin Mary. As they sang, more and more voices joined in. But in the vast expanse of the Basilica, the chant remained a thin piping chorus of voices wafting up into the ample spaces of that huge nave, echoing in the spanning dome and dying away in gently receding waves of appeal and hope and painful expectation.

When the last few notes were still simmering in all ears, it was the old weeping Chilean who took the initiative. To everybody's surprise, and to the horror of the few very formal-minded cardinals present, Silva tapped Valeska lightly on the shoulder with a knobby, bony finger. The sequence of events that followed could have been conceived by an expert choreographer.

In the eyes of the onlookers, the actions and expressions of Pope and cardinal were so unusual and spontaneous that they passed in front of the pilgrims and visitors like a series of sharply defined segments in a filmed drama, a series of slow-motion images designed to convey a spiritual vision and message.

Silva tapping the Pontiff's shoulder . . . Valeska craning around, smiling, listening to the old man . . . Silva's bulging eyes and moving lips . . . Valeska shaking his head, still smiling . . . Silva nodding vigorously, his mouth open in protest, every line of his gaunt, parchment-like face wreathed in vehemence . . . Valeska rising slowly and turning around to face the cardinals . . . Silva trying to kneel down, but instead falling with a little cry, like a thrown bundle of scarlet robes, at Valeska's feet, his lips touching the instep of Valeska's right shoe, one hand fumbling desperately for Valeska's hand as the Pope stretched it down to help him . . . Silva seizing it and kissing the Fisherman's Ring on the fourth finger . . . some Vatican aides rushing with shocked faces to pick the old man up and carry him away between them. . . .

After that, what happened etched itself even more graphically in onlookers' memories: Cardinals rising slowly to their feet. Some standing and looking around. Some moving forward immediately to kneel and kiss Valeska's instep and ring. Others, once on their feet, whispering and gesticulating with colleagues, shooting half-frightened glances in Vales-

ka's direction. Other cardinals standing by themselves, at a total loss. Many lining up in a rough queue in order to perform that double obeisance. Many others backing away as from a dangerous situation, in groups of fives and sevens, eventually piercing the security cordon and leaving the scene with stiffly closed mouths and hooded eyes. They wanted no truck with this act of theater, or with this Pope's real character, now plainly known to them. Now their attitude was a matter of public record too. Why not? All was clear and in the light of day, for their colleagues, for Valeska, for the people.

Throughout it all, Valeska stood mute, motionless, a look of deep tiredness veiling his face, apparently not seeing anyone or anything in particular, withdrawn into some invisible sanctum of his own, some holy of holies, not even reacting as each cardinal held his hand momentarily, kissed it, kissed his instep, and withdrew. Some few gave a quick upward glance at his face, then looked away and departed. Valeska was oblivious to all this, apparently. He did not know how many came forward, and how many turned their backs on him. But Frankevic was assiduously counting and identifying the recalcitrants—actually forty-six of them, and not one surprise among them.

Eventually, it came to an end. Only Valeska remained, his back to the balustrade, Frankevic and Vatican aides standing to one side. The Pope motioned to the officials standing by. He walked over to the marble staircase and disappeared slowly down into the crypt below, as the great bells of St. Peter's starting tolling out the noon Angelus in their inimitable ocean-deep tones. The security cordon drew near, surrounding the High Altar and the balustrade. Other security officers persuaded most of the onlookers to move on.

Frankevic stood apart, tears of joy and frustration blinding him. At least, he reasoned, all was clear now. Friend and foe were on notice. Even if His Holiness had failed to rally all his cardinals, as he had failed in the past to rally all his bishops; and even if his pontificate was reckoned a failure on the human scale; still, ambiguity had been dispelled. Frankovic remembered the sense, but not the exact words, of a desperate plea and prayer made by the Greek warrior Ajax, forced to fight superior odds on a darkened plain:

Father in Heaven,
Deliver us from this darkness.
And make our skies clear.
If we must die,
Let us die in the Light.