



From the Deacon's Desk

When Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina was elected as the 266th Pope five years ago and chose the name "Francis", he opened doors to discuss a remarkable event in church history

On the evening of Nov. 16, 1965, quietly alerted to the event by word-of-mouth, some 40 Roman Catholic bishops made their way to celebrate Mass in an ancient, underground basilica in the Catacombs of Domitilla on the outskirts of the Eternal City.

Both the place, and the timing, of the liturgy had a profound resonance: The church marked the spot where tradition said two Roman soldiers were executed for converting to Christianity. And beneath the feet of the bishops, and extending through more than 10 miles of tunnels, were the tombs of more than 100,000 Christians from the earliest centuries of the church.

In addition, the Mass was celebrated shortly before the end of the Second Vatican Council, the historic gathering of all the world's bishops that over three years set the church on the path of reform and an unprecedented engagement with the modern world — launching dialogue with other Christians and other religions, endorsing religious freedom and moving the Mass from Latin to the vernacular, among other things.

But another concern among many of the 2,200 churchmen at Vatican II was to truly make Catholicism a "church of the poor," as Pope John XXIII put it shortly before convening the council. The bishops who gathered for Mass at the catacombs that November evening were devoted to seeing that commitment become a reality.

So as the liturgy concluded in the dim light of the vaulted fourth-century chamber, each of the prelates came up to the altar and affixed his name to a brief but passionate manifesto that pledged them all to "try to live according to the ordinary manner of our people in all that concerns housing, food, means of transport, and related matters."

The signatories vowed to renounce personal possessions, fancy vestments and "names and titles that express prominence and power," and they said they would make advocating for the poor and powerless the focus of their ministry.

In all this, they said, "we will seek collaborators in ministry so that we can be animators according to the Spirit rather than dominators according to the world; we will try to make ourselves as humanly present and welcoming as possible; and we will show ourselves to be open to all, no matter what their beliefs."

The document would become known as the Pact of the Catacombs, and the signers hoped it would mark a turning point in church history.

Instead, for all intents and purposes, the Pact of the Catacombs disappeared.

It is barely mentioned in the extensive histories of Vatican II, and while copies of the text are in circulation, no one knows what happened to the original document.

Part Two of the story of the *Pact of the Catacombs* will be in next week's bulletin. Deacon's Desk articles also available on the web page.

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