

Vatican archive gives up its global secrets

Absent the conspiracies of a Dan Brown thriller, the book *Secretum* reveals historical treasures of geopolitics, from Henry VIII's divorce petition to Holocaust denial

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The author of the book was granted unprecedented access to the Vatican archives and interviews with its director, Sergio Pagano

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Conspiracy theorists will be disappointed: there are no Martian skulls, no Jewish candelabrum looted from

Jerusalem under Vespasian or nails from the Crucifixion in what used to be known as the Vatican Secret Archive.

All are items rumoured to have been squirrelled away in vaults underneath the Vatican. Instead, Massimo Franco, an Italian author granted unprecedented access, was able to peruse a letter from English noblemen begging Pope Clement VII to dissolve Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, documents recounting the trial of Galileo and papers that illuminate Pius XII's Holocaust dilemma.

His book, *Secretum*, is based on interviews with Sergio Pagano, the director of the institution, a down-to-earth monsignor who has been in charge of the Vatican's information "hard disc" for the past 25 years. The title reprises the official Latin name of the [Pope's private archive](#), Archivum Secretum Vaticanum, founded by Paul V in 1611.



Diplomatic papers illuminated the Holy See's delicate relations with China, Japan and the United States in Asia as they evolved over the past century

VATICAN MEDIA/EPA

In the book, due out in Italy tomorrow, Franco explains why in 2019 the Pope changed the name from "Secret" to "Apostolic", to escape the sinister connotations of the

word — signifying private — that inspired authors such as Dan Brown.

On one of Franco's early visits his host pulled out a parchment laden with red wax seals and titled *Sanctissimo in Chris* from a cupboard in his private office: an appeal for an annulment on behalf of the English King, written in Latin, and backed by 81 dignitaries.

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Some of the seals are missing, however, representing people who decided to withhold their support and were - either executed or imprisoned, Pagano explained. Clement was unmoved by the 1530 plea, opening the door to the Anglican schism.

The document escaped being looted by Napoleonic troops when it was rolled up and concealed inside a wooden throne that still stands in the antechamber of the director's office.

Pope Pius VII at the coronation of Napoleon, who once stole the archive contents and the pope

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The French emperor carried off the entire archive in 1810, transporting it to Paris in convoys of wooden carts drawn by oxen. A year earlier Bonaparte had captured Pius VII and carried him off to France as well. He was eager to get his hands on the document formalising his excommunication — a punishment meted out by the Pope for Napoleon's annexation of papal territories.

The document is now safely back in the archive, but not all the papers were recovered following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. Some, relating to the heresy trials of the Inquisition, ended up being recycled, while others found their way to Trinity College Dublin.

Researchers are poring over newly released documents from the pontificate of Pius XII to try to understand his failure to [denounce the crimes of Nazi Germany](#). The files show that the Vatican received information on the extermination of Jews as early as 1941. Pius's failure to speak out was motivated by the need to protect Vatican sources within the German resistance and to avoid provoking reprisals against Catholics in Germany and Poland.

Critics have argued that [Pius was influenced by antisemitic instincts](#) and a fondness for German culture acquired when he served as *papal nuncio* in Germany before the war.

Pagano acknowledged that it was harder to explain his silence after the war had ended. The Pope had received Holocaust survivors, expressing “words full of humanity and closeness, but he never mentioned the Shoah”, he said. Concerns over the creation of the state of Israel in Palestine and a perception that the new enemy was communism might explain his caution, Pagano said.

Pagano, 75, a Barnabite priest, joined the Vatican archive in 1981, only a decade after electricity was introduced in its 53 miles of shelving. Staff used candles and torches for fear that wiring might produce a short circuit.

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He described in detail how its diplomatic papers illuminated the Holy See's delicate relations with China, Japan and the United States in Asia as they evolved over the past century.

In 2018 the Holy See entered into a secret pact with the Chinese government to jointly administer the Catholic Church in China, seen by some as a betrayal of underground Catholics who remained faithful to Rome under Chinese Communist Party persecution.

Despite the pact being renewed twice, the climate of trust between the two sides does not appear to have improved. Pagano revealed that the Vatican had secretly removed its archive from Hong Kong in September 2019, spiriting it to Rome via Manila.

The director said he had been advised to remove the documentation by a member of the local hierarchy, whom he could not name for safety reasons. "The demonstrations had recently begun in Hong Kong against Beijing. And perhaps they already feared that it would end badly," Pagano said.

Franco's book offers a sweeping account of hundreds of years in the life of the Catholic Church, ranging from the names of Pius XII's tame goldfinches — Hansel and Gretel — to religious geopolitics and espionage, under the guidance of the archive's surprisingly candid director.