

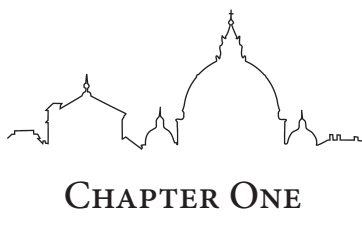
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

JOHN O'NEILL

THE FISHERMAN'S
TOMB

THE TRUE STORY OF THE
VATICAN'S SECRET SEARCH





CHAPTER ONE

THE VISIT

Today

It's arguably one of the best-kept secrets in Rome, Italy. Reservations for the tour are hard to obtain, as tours are limited to about 250 people per day. *Travel+Style* magazine calls it "one of Rome's hottest tickets,"¹ and the *Boston Globe* warns that it's "one of the toughest tickets to come by in the Eternal City."² The exclusive tour of the newly opened necropolis beneath St. Peter's Basilica, called the Scavi Tour,³ takes visitors on a fascinating journey through one of Rome's oldest mysteries — but the tour only tells part of the story. The mystery itself goes back nearly two thousand years, and the Vatican's top-secret search for answers lasted for decades, involving some of the brightest minds and one of the wealthiest men of the twentieth century.

Spring 1940

The priest came to Houston likely early in 1940. He was an emissary sent directly from Rome by Pope Pius XII. The world was in flames with the onset of World War II, and monsters like Hitler, Stalin, and Tojo stalked the globe almost unhindered. Poland had been conquered in three weeks by Nazi Panzers, aided by Soviet armies. The Japanese

Empire held large parts of China and looked hungrily south to the oilfields of Indonesia. Blackshirts in Italy marched daily outside the Vatican, inspired by the buffoon Mussolini and dreams of repeating ancient Roman glory. German Panzers gathered on the Western Front soon to crush France in a new type of war called the Blitzkrieg. America slept amidst the chaos of war.

The priest's name was Walter Carroll. Although only thirty years old, Carroll was among the most trusted confidants of the pope. He was the right hand of the pope's right hand man, Papal Secretary Giovanni Montini, better known now as Pope Paul VI.⁴ Father Carroll would die young — before the age of forty — but in that short time he would have a huge impact on the world, both during and after the war. As he stepped off the plane in Houston, Texas, however, he confronted a mission far more important and more lasting than the war.⁵

Texas was an unusual destination for a papal emissary on an urgent mission. He had come to see a Texas oilman and wealthy Catholic named George Strake. Strake was among the largest single donors in the world to Catholic projects, and he requested that all his donations be made anonymously. Because this meeting took place in secret, the details have been lost to history. The meeting likely took place at the Strake home, which still stands at 3214 Inwood Drive in Houston's River Oaks Subdivision. The then newly constructed English home on an acre backing up to Houston's most prestigious country club was among the largest and most stylish in the city. Houston, then a city of 400,000, had largely avoided the Great Depression due to the vast oil reserves surrounding it, its great port, and the ingenuity of its businessmen.

No record remains, except perhaps in Vatican archives, of the precise words of that meeting. However, it became a part of the heritage of the Strake family. Carroll came to Strake with a highly sensitive request from Pope Pius XII and Monsignor Montini: the Catholic Church sought Strake's commitment to finance a special project. Carroll explained that this project, one of the most important in the Church, would involve immense, uncertain cost. Moreover, if Strake agreed to finance it, he could tell absolutely no one about it. In effect, the Church was asking Strake to sign a blank check, without credit or reward, for a totally secret, wildcat project of very doubtful success.

Strake thought about the strange request and agreed.

February 11–14, 1939

The secret project that sent Carroll to Strake had begun to unfold in Rome a few months earlier, also in a very unlikely place. Pope Pius XI died on February 11, 1939. The deceased pope was an extraordinary man, mentor and spiritual father to many, both rich and poor, and well loved by many, particularly by Eugenio Pacelli, his successor. As a serious mountain climber, Pius XI was the first to summit several peaks in the Alps which are now named for him.⁶ A Chilean glacier, the Pio XI, the largest in South America,⁷ also bears his name.⁸ Before he became pope, Pius XI (then Ambrogio Damiano Achille Ratti) had been the Vatican librarian — the keeper of the Vatican's secrets. He was plucked from the Vatican Library and, against his wishes, turned into a papal diplomat. He was known for his no-nonsense attitude, unusual in an age of formalism and ceremony. Before he died, Pius XI asked only to be buried under St. Peter's Basilica in a simple grave.

In the middle of February 1939, an excavation team began to dig beneath the basilica for both a grave for the deceased pope and a small chapel to surround it.⁹ Because the area below the Vatican was only six feet high and the floor of the immense structure loomed above, they had to dig down. In the process, a workman fell through the floor. Very quickly he found himself in an amazing and until-then unknown world, with bright mural paintings of flowers (particularly roses), birds, vases full of vividly colored fruit, idyllic landscapes, cupids, and pretty winged beings.¹⁰ The dark and gloomy underworld starkly contrasted with the bright rainbow of colors in the paintings. Vatican officials rapidly determined that the paintings were Roman funeral murals from the height of Rome's power during the first and second centuries. Digging further, the workmen discovered the remains of the daughter of a Roman consul, wrapped in purple garb with a golden brooch. Then they encountered the most amazing find of all: the much simpler grave of a woman from the mid-second century, with Christian inscriptions on her tomb.¹¹

This was an astounding discovery. During its first few centuries, Christianity was a secret, illegal cult in the Roman Empire, and Christians were subject to terrible waves of persecution. Few, if any, Christian artifacts survived from this early period.¹² Across the entire Mediterranean world, Christian inscriptions or signs from the first and second centuries are extraordinarily rare.¹³ To date, archeologists have uncovered a few inscriptions in a hidden cave south of Istanbul, various marks in the catacombs, coded messages through the fish symbol (the ichthus), the Good Shepherd, the altered cross, and the like. The workers and Vatican officials were stunned at the discovery of this early Christian woman's grave.

Blood sport was a popular form of entertainment in the Roman Empire. During waves of persecution Christians were captured, tortured, and publicly killed before large, enthusiastic crowds. Sometimes they were crucified, burned, boiled, or torn to pieces by wild animals in front of appreciative and wildly cheering spectators. At best, the remainder of the Christians' families would be enslaved and their property seized. Informers were incentivized by a share of the victim's property. Sometimes captured Christians were tortured until they gave up the names of other believers. The Roman governor Pliny, writing to Emperor Trajan, noted his frustration that many Christians even under torture would not recant. One such brave Christian, a young mother named Perpetua, was stripped of her baby and sent to be torn apart by wild beasts in A.D. 203. She would not recant even to stay with her baby. The Christians were incomprehensible to Roman authorities, but they saw them as superstitious enemies whose elimination was required by the *dignitas* of Imperial Rome.¹⁴

In those days, the Roman Empire stretched from Persia in the east to Land's End in England in the west, and from Melk in Austria and German outposts to the deep North African desert. The Empire had seldom lost a war in its long history, and even its battlefield losses were few. It achieved a degree of engineering, wealth, and civilization that would not again be reached for many centuries. The famous Pax Romana had descended on the Mediterranean world.

The impudence of the small Christian cult in honoring as God a criminal condemned by Roman law was intolerable to Rome, if also regarded as somewhat insane. Indeed, the world must have (not illogically) perceived the failure of the small cult to disband as crazy. Christians were

viewed as a particularly secretive cult, accused of practicing horrific rituals. They were unpopular and risked death if discovered. As a result, they could not leave any traceable public display of their beliefs. They were a cult of caves and catacombs. Thus, the 1939 discovery of Christian inscriptions deep in the seat of Roman power — a few hundred yards from the place where the Emperor's palace once stood — was hardly believable.¹⁵ All work ceased, and the highest Vatican official was summoned to verify with his own eyes this improbable find.

Papal Secretary of State Eugenio Pacelli, soon to be elected as Pope Pius XII, was responsible for burying his predecessor. This discovery of an early Christian's grave under the Vatican reminded him of an ancient Christian legend. Christian tradition from earliest times held that the Apostle Peter had gone to Rome and, after his nearby execution by the Emperor Nero around A.D. 66, had been buried on Vatican Hill.¹⁶ A number of first- and second-century writings supported this tradition, ranging from Tacitus's description of Nero's slaughter of Christians following the Great Fire of Rome to early second-century Christian accounts.¹⁷ The tradition further related that 250 years after Peter's death, Emperor Constantine had built the first St. Peter's Basilica in Rome as a memorial to Peter directly over his grave.¹⁸ Secret excavations by the Church in 1513 and 1683 to verify the truth of the long-standing tradition found only pagan graves, however, and the Church abandoned any further effort to find Peter. While the burial place of Peter is a pious tradition and not a matter of faith, the Church — facing the pressures across Europe, especially in the onslaught of the Protestant Reformation — feared unnecessarily rattling the dearly held beliefs of the Catholic faithful.¹⁹ Very likely, discovering a foundation of pagan graves, rather than the

tombs of saints, under the Church's principal and historical seat of authority would have added fuel to the fires of controversy that already raged around Rome in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As later described by Margherita Guarducci, the famous archeologist who would become the heroine of the Vatican excavations: "The fear of finding something down there which would contradict or modify the tradition dear to the faithful overcame the desire to appease a burning curiosity."²⁰

Since his earliest childhood, Pope Pius XII (who grew up in Rome) had been consumed by stories of the early Roman martyrs. He also believed deeply in the science of archeology. Faced with the discovery of a Christian tomb beneath the Vatican, he decided to recommence the Church's search for the first pope. Against all odds, Pius XII intended to reach across nearly two thousand years to find Peter.²¹ It was a brave decision made in the face of repeated historical failure. Yet Pius XII, unlike some of his predecessors, saw science — particularly archeology — as an ally, not an enemy, of Christianity. With the increasing influence across the Western world of the work of men such as Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx, the pope saw the immense importance of using modern science in the service of religious belief. Numerous secularists denied that the Apostle Peter ever went to Rome at all. Even Martin Luther had cast doubt upon the issue, stating, "It is unknown where in the City [of Rome] the bodies of Saint Peter and Saint Paul are located or even whether they are there at all."²² Likely Pope Pius XII hoped that discovering the first pope's bones beneath St. Peter's Basilica would offer a tangible demonstration of the powerful interplay between faith and science. While an increasingly secular culture tried to pit the two against each

other, Pius XII recognized that science and truth go hand-in-hand. Finding Peter would throw the weight of modern science behind a dearly held tradition of the Church, offering a needed boost for the faithful during a dark and often faithless time.

Yet the Church was nearly broke from the Great Depression and the Nazi occupation of Europe, so the pope first had to reach across the ocean for the immense financing necessary to carry out his plan. With his huge fortune and generosity to the Church, Texas oilman George Strake could make Pius's dream of finding Peter possible.

Strake surprisingly said yes, effectively writing a blank check to the Church. Father Carroll reported the agreement to Pius XII and Montini. Over the ensuing years, the Church privately contacted the Strakes many times about this great project. True to initial intent, both the search for Peter's remains and Strake's involvement in the search were kept wholly hidden from the world. Thus, one of the greatest explorations of the twentieth century began in the dark recesses beneath the Vatican, unknown to the outside world and cloaked in total secrecy. Over time the search would lead to the discovery of one of the greatest archeological sites of the ancient world. The adventure would involve an interesting cast of characters, including an American spy for the Vatican. After many overlooked clues and false leads, this ancient puzzle would require an unlikely woman genius and seventy-five years of searching to fully unlock. This woman's discoveries and battles would rival or exceed those of even the greatest fictional archeologists like Indiana Jones or Robert Langdon of *The Da Vinci Code*. As we shall see, truth would prove much stranger and more fantastic than fiction.

CONTENTS

Foreword 15

Chapter One

The Visit 19

Chapter Two

George Strake 27

Chapter Three

Peter 37

Chapter Four

The Great Fire of Rome 41

Chapter Five

Vatican Hill 45

Chapter Six

Pius's Gamble 55

Chapter Seven

Pope Pius XII and His Team 59

Chapter Eight

The Clues in the Vatican Library 67

Chapter Nine

Into the City of the Dead 73

Chapter Ten

Inside the Tomb 79

Chapter Eleven

The Three Amigos 87

Chapter Twelve

The War 91

Chapter Thirteen

The Flood and the Curse 103

Chapter Fourteen
Margherita Guarducci 111

Chapter Fifteen
The Inscriptions Speak 123

Chapter Sixteen
The Bones Speak 129

Chapter Seventeen
Ferrua's Revenge 133

Chapter Eighteen
The Necropolis Uncovered 139

Chapter Nineteen
Guarducci Alone: A New Beginning 145

Chapter Twenty
Return of the Apostle 155

Chapter Twenty-One
The Great Persecution and Helena 159

Afterword 165

Appendices 171

I. The Inscriptions

II. The Conroe Oil Field

III. The Story of Vatican Hill

IV. Timeline

V. The Hottest Ticket in Rome

Notes and Acknowledgments 185

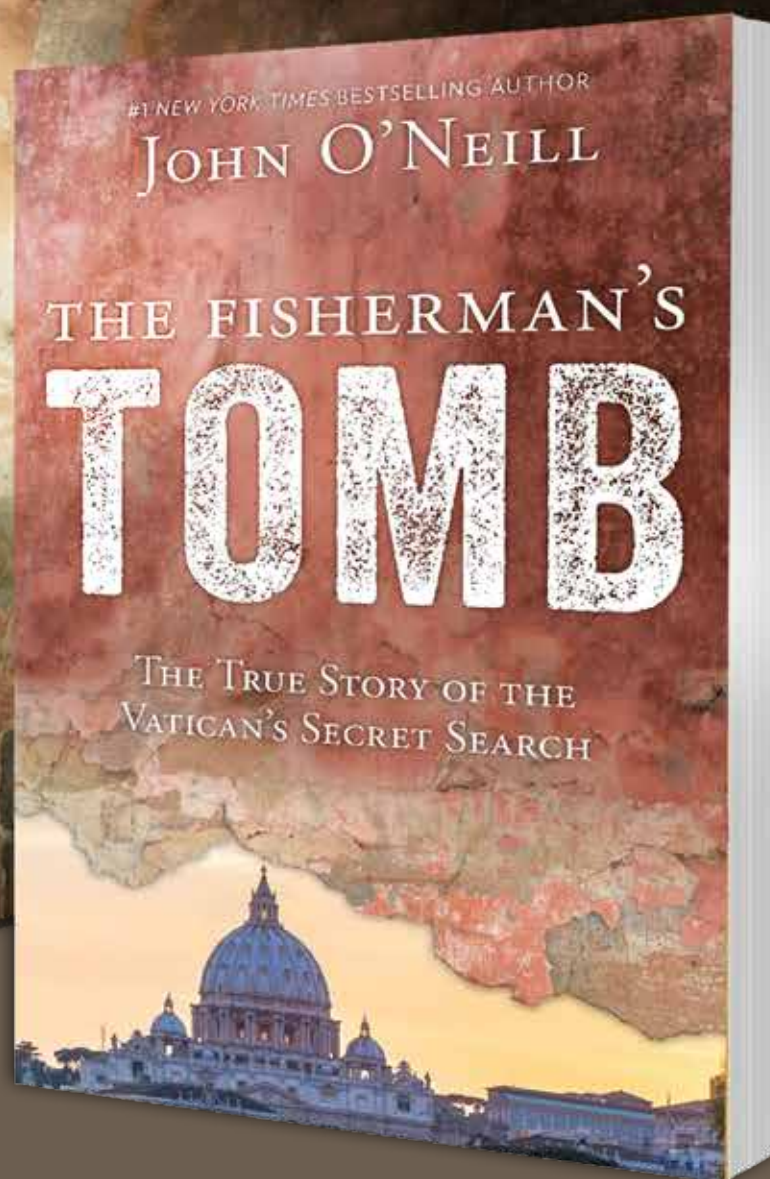
In 1939, an unsuspecting team of workmen unearthed an early Christian grave beneath the Vatican.

Their surprising discovery launched a secret, often contentious quest to discover the long-lost burial place of the Apostle Peter. The full story of the incredible search and its backers has never been told – until now.

The improbable hero – a wealthy Texas oil man who bankrolled the expedition at the secret request of Pope Pius XII.

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