LETTER FROM ROME

GOD'S LIBRARIANS

The Vatican Library enters the twenty-first century.

BY DANIEL MENDELSOHN

One day early in the sixteen-twenties, in a quiet room near the heart of the Vatican Palace, an archivist working in the library of the Holy See stumbled upon a text that certain people had been trying to get their hands on for the better part of a thousand years. Painstakingly written in tightly curling Greek characters, the manuscript had been copied out sometime in the fourteenth century, but the work itself had been composed, apparently in secret, around 550 A.D. Until it was rediscovered that day, a handful of enigmatic references to it had tantalized scholars: an entry in a tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia, for instance, tersely described the book's shocking contents. But the text itself seemed to have disappeared.

The Greek title, "Anekdota," means "unpublished writings," but the work is generally known by its Latin title, "Historia Arcana"—"The Secret History." The reason it had not been circulated during its author's lifetime was immediately clear to the historians, churchmen, and statesmen who read it soon after it appeared in book form, in 1623. The author was the distinguished Byzantine historian Procopius, who in two published works admiringly chronicled the achievements of his emperor, Justinian, who went on to be celebrated as the last great Roman emperor and a model of European kingship. But "The Secret History" painted a devastating new portrait of Justinian and his inner circle as venal, corrupt, immoral, and un-Christian. The tidbits about Justinian's wife, Theodora, were so shocking that Nicolò Alamanni, the librarian who found the manuscript, omitted them from the printed edition. (It is to "The Secret History" that we owe the Empress's famous complaint that Nature had granted to womankind only three orifices by which to be satisfied.) So controversial that some readers decided it must be a hoax, "The Secret History" set off a bitter debate about just who Justinian was, and raised questions about the way history is written—about the relationship of power to truth—that have persisted to this day.

The manuscript of Procopius has by now been carefully bound and catalogued, the modest label on its spine, "VAT. GR. 1001," not remotely suggesting the importance of its contents. (The abbreviation—for *Vaticanus graecus*—indicates that it belongs among the Vatican's Greek manuscripts.) But the twisty tale of its discovery exemplifies some of the paradoxical problems that have long haunted the institution in which it was found: the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, the Vatican Apostolic Library—or, as its present-day

The library was founded as a public information resource, but the Vatican's relationship to knowledge and authority is vexed.

users affectionately call it, the Vat. One problem is obvious: the Vat's collection, which has been accreting since the mid-fourteen-hundreds, is so vast that even the people who run it haven't always known what they're sitting on top of. Another is that although the library was founded as, essentially, a public information resource, the Vatican itself has had a historically vexed relationship to knowledge, power, secrecy, and authority. Its library may possess some of the most ancient manuscripts of Scripture in existence, but for centuries the Catholic Church held that ordinary people shouldn't be able to read the Bible—that the Old and New Testaments themselves should be a kind of "secret history" for everyone but the scholar-priests trained to decipher the arcane tongues in which they were written.

Recently, the Vat has been trying to address at least some of these problems. In September, the library reopened following a three-year closing—the final and sometimes controversial stage of a decades-long renovation of its premises and modernization of its technologies. Although some of what was done addressed mundane physical issues inevitable in a structure that has been in use since the height of the Italian Renaissance, the most interesting aspect of the renovation has to do with the precious texts themselves. These now enjoy the benefits afforded by online searches, enhanced and updated cataloguing, digitally scanned imaging, and even electronic tagging—high-tech amenities whose aim, in a sense, is to guarantee that items like the Procopius manuscript never get lost again. But while the Vat's modernization may be a transformative moment, the story of how it came to pass is fraught with tensions between tradition and innovation, science and religion, clerics and scholars which have marked the history of the library since its creation in the fourteen-fifties—the brainchild of a bookish Pope who wanted to establish a seat of humanistic learning at the ideological and geographical heart of the Roman Catholic Church.

FABIO FRUSTACI/EIDON/ZUMA

To get inside the Vat, you need a passport—one of the many ways in which this library isn't like any other. Vatican City is, technically, its own country, which means that if you want to visit the library of the Holy See you have to stop in a little office just inside the Porta Angelica (off to the right as you stand in St. Peter's Square looking at the Basilica), where they take your papers and give you a visitor's pass. If you continue up the Via di Porta Angelica and turn right, you come to a paved courtyard where tournaments once took place and which is now filled with parked cars. On either side of you are two long arms of the Vatican Palace; in front is a stone wing that connects the arms, like the horizontal element in the letter "H." Since the sixteenth century, this stone hyphen has been the home of the Vat. When I visited in September, just before the reopening, workmen in coveralls were milling around a giant crane in front of the main entrance. In addition to the reorganization and interior restoration, the Vat's façade has been cleaned up and the roof repaired.

Behind the dun-colored walls, in temperature- and humidity-controlled subterranean bunkers, lie the other reasons the Vat isn't like any other library: collections that make it the world's greatest treasure house of the writings at the core of the Western tradition. There are, to begin with, the eighty thousand manuscripts of late-antique, medieval, Byzantine, and Renaissance provenance, in dozens of languages, from Aramaic to Old Church Slavonic. These include some of the earliest texts of the New Testament and of Virgil's Aeneid, the oldest Hebrew book in existence, and one of the oldest copies of what scholars know as "Book I, Proposition 47" and tens of millions of high-school students know as the Pythagorean theorem. There is an unmatched collection of more than eight thousand incunabula (the name, from the Latin for "cradle," given to the earliest printed books). There are more than three hundred thousand Greek, Roman, and Papal coins and medals. There are a hundred thousand maps, prints, engravings, and drawings. There are, too, the nearly two million printed books and the thousands of specialized scholarly periodicals crucial to the study of the primary texts. Separate from the library, there are the Vatican Secret Archives—the Vatican's collection of the Papacy's own papers. (Despite the Dan Brown-ish overtones, the word "secret" here has its humdrum,

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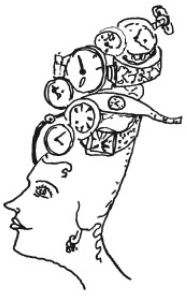
etymological sense of something "set apart" from the rest of the collection.) This collection alone runs to thirty-five thousand volumes.

All told, the contents of the stone hyphen behind the Porta Angelica make it an institution whose importance is almost impossible to sum up. One scholar I talked to while I was in Rome said, simply, "There is no other library in the world."

A lot of what has been done to bring this collection into the twenty-first century can't be gauged from a tour of the premises, as Massimo Ceresa, the librarian who showed me around, reminded me. The ancient manuscripts are being digitally scanned. Large swathes of books have at last been catalogued; most of the printed books are now electronically tagged (as will be anyone who wants to consult them); a WiFi network is in place. A computerized card catalogue long ago replaced the old index-card files. As for the rest, Ceresa—a compact man with a broad, kindly face, who has worked at the Vat since 1972 and now presides over the seventy-five thousand volumes in its Reference Library—told me that pretty much everything that wasn't actually new had been "refreshed."

As he showed me around the disorienting warren of grand halls, spare reading rooms, offices, and laboratories that constitute the Vatican Library today, everything did look as if it had just been, or was still being, painted or shined. Across the hall from the modest room where scholars, sitting at plain wooden desks arranged in rows, pore over the ancient manuscripts, workers listening to boom boxes were putting the finishing touches on the Manuscript Reference Reading Room, the headquarters of the Reference Library. Nearby, the printed-books reading room has been restocked, lined with the kinds of books that help scholars make sense of the manuscripts ("Early Woodcut Initials," "The Venetian Printing Press," dictionaries in Chinese, Hebrew, Coptic, Arabic). As we left the long room, we crossed a vestibule where men, working in pairs, were busily reshelving books, rhythmically handing them off from cart to shelf.



To move from one room to another here is to traverse half a millennium. Ceresa took me through a vast frescoed, barrel-vaulted Renaissance-style hall in which giant and now obsolete wooden card-catalogue banks seemed to be sleeping; from there we went downstairs to the ultra-modern periodicals room, which has the hushed stainless-steel gleam of a Swiss bank. Catercorner to a shiny new elevator was a carved Baroque portal with elaborately inlaid doors. When he noticed me examining it, Ceresa mentioned that this was the portal to the old Barberini Library, one of the great aristocratic collections the Vat has absorbed. Then we moved outside into the Cortile, a grassy, palm-dotted courtyard, originally part of a design by the Renaissance architect Bramante, where scholars can stretch their legs and have a cappuccino from a coffee bar. Tucked into a corner of the Cortile is a new tower of pinkish brick: part of a wing housing various offices and laboratories.

Ceresa took me into the tower and up the spiral stairs to look at the photography lab, where the manuscripts are photocopied for scholars. Opposite one of the ubiquitous portraits of Benedict XVI, large machines bearing inscrutable names ("OP5000"), of the sort you associate with medical offices, dominated the floor, and klieg lights clustered around tables suggested an operating theatre. Something about the scene reminded me of premature babies. On one table, a single page of text lay in a tray, waiting to be photographed. Glancing from the picture of the Pope to the gadgets to the page, I found it hard not to think that Pope Nicholas V, the man who set all this in motion, would have approved.

The origins of the Vat—and, in a way, of its modernizing energies—can be traced to Nicholas's brief but energetic reign, from 1447 to 1455. Nicholas was a polymath and bibliophile of extraordinary range; his friend and eventual successor, the fun-loving Pius II (the only Pope, as far as we know, who wrote an erotic novel), said of him that "what he does not know is outside the range of human knowledge." At a time when Renaissance humanism was perceived as a potential threat to the Church and its teachings, Nicholas encouraged the study of the pagan classics. He made a number of shrewd hires, including the great scholar Lorenzo Valla, an authority on Latin style, who used his linguistic expertise to sniff out forgeries; he also paid considerable sums for the translation of works in Greek, a language that only scholars were expected to know, into Latin, the language all educated people were expected to know—one of the Vat's earliest steps toward information-sharing. The Pope, indeed, intended these treasures not for private but for public use—"for the common convenience of the learned," as he put it in a letter to one of the agents he sent scurrying all over Europe looking for valuable manuscripts. "Like other Renaissance princes, the Popes built their private libraries as a knowledge base," Anthony Grafton, a professor of history at Princeton and an authority on the Renaissance, told me when I was in Rome.

Nicholas left eleven hundred Greek and Latin manuscripts to a successor, Sixtus IV, the second of the Vat's three Papal founders and a man whose much touted piety didn't preclude a penchant for nepotism. (He built the Sistine Chapel; his nephew, Julius II, commissioned Michelangelo to decorate it.) Sixtus' great contribution to the Vat was to institutionalize both the library and its mission: in a bull issued in June, 1475—the Vat's official founding date—he established "the convenience and honor of the learned and studious" as the priority of the library. Six years later, when the Vatican librarian catalogued the library's holdings, it was the largest collection of books in the Western world. A century later, another Sixtus—Sixtus V—ordered the library's most comprehensive physical overhaul until the recent renovations. It was he who built the Vat's current quarters, bisecting Bramante's landscaped courtyard.

At just about the time that Sixtus was ruining Bramante's design, theological and political upheavals triggered by the Reformation were taking their toll on the library's commitment to unfettered scholarly research. (The Vat has

come to possess—with what complex emotions we can only guess—a curious relic of that religious tumult: the adulterous love letters sent to Anne Boleyn by Henry VIII, whose desire to divorce his wife and marry Anne led to England's break with the Roman Catholic Church.) A measure of how much and how quickly the Vatican's intellectual culture changed between the fifteenth century and the sixteenth can be seen in the fate of the work of Lorenzo Valla, the Latin expert whom Nicholas V hired. In 1440, Valla had demonstrated that a document called the Donation of Constantine, allegedly composed by the emperor who converted the Roman Empire to Christianity, was forged. In the Donation, Constantine transfers power over the western provinces of the empire, including Italy, to the Church; its exposure as a forgery was a serious blow to Papal politicking. A century later Valla's findings—popular reading among early Protestants—were placed on the Vatican's Index of forbidden books.

As time passed, ideological narrowness wasn't the only threat to intellectual openness. During the three centuries following Sixtus V, wagonloads of cultural treasures were delivered to the Vat, hoarded by appetitive Popes or offered up by humble, grateful, or politically ambitious conquerors and monarchs. The sheer size and value of these collections occasionally triggered the ingrained habits of secrecy and possessiveness that you often encounter when dealing with wealthy private institutions. In the seventeenth century, the English diarist John Evelyn was already complaining that the books were "all shut up in Presses…and not expos'd on shelves to the naked ayre." The hundred years after Evelyn were particularly dire. In the seventeen-sixties, Clement XIII—the Pope who put fig leaves on all the Vatican's classical nudes—issued a bull severely limiting access to the manuscripts; twenty years later one librarian was described as "worse than Rhadamantus and Minos," the gruesomely severe judges of classical mythology. By the end of the century, a punning Spanish priest who knew his classical languages denounced the Vat as being not so much a *biblioteca*—the word comes from the Greek for a "depository for books"—as a *bibliotaphio*, a "tomb for books."

"I stopped by the orphanage on my way home."

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There were occasional attempts at improving access. Leo XIII, a forward-looking Pope who read Marx and was the first Pontiff to be filmed (you can see him blessing the camera), opened the Vatican Secret Archives to qualified researchers in 1881, and did the same for the Vat itself in 1883. He also formalized the relationship between the Cardinal Librarian, the titular head of the library, and the Prefect, the cleric who oversees the Vat's day-to-day activities and, more than anyone else, sets its tone. But as recently as 1993 the Prefect could complain that two-thirds of the Vat's holdings had still not even been catalogued. When I asked the Renaissance scholar Ingrid Rowland what things had been like when she first started using the Vat, as a grad student back in the late nineteen-seventies, she laughed. "When I first came, the incunabula weren't completely catalogued. So if you needed an incunabulum you had to know where it was—which basically meant you had to know someone who knew. It was totally word of mouth. It was like the times when the books were first *written*." During her student days, she added, the shoulders of female scholars had to be completely covered.

That the library in the late twentieth century was in certain respects no more efficient than it had been in the late fifteenth was, to many, an embarrassment. This was the state of affairs when, in the mid-nineteen-eighties, things began to change.

Depending on whom you talk to, the movement to update, computerize, and digitally disseminate the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana was either an inevitable step forward in the history of the library or the brainchild of one man: Father Leonard Boyle, a charismatic and controversial Irish priest who was appointed Prefect of the library in 1984 and was ousted in 1997, after his dealings with some American fund-raising associates resulted in lawsuits involving the Vatican. In the mid-nineteen-nineties, Boyle had a visionary plan to scan all the Vatican's manuscripts and thereby create a shareable, downloadable Vat. (It was his inexpert attempts to raise money for his high-minded project that landed him in trouble.) Although this project represents just one facet of the modernization, it is a symbol, in the eyes of many people I spoke with, of the Vat's potential to be a thoroughly modern institution—of the humanistic, forward-looking strain in its DNA. When I went to Rome in September, I was struck by how frequently the conversation came back to Boyle, who died in 1999. The scholars I

interviewed all gave him credit for the modernizing impulse. Not so the clerics, who tended not to bring him up or to suggest that the push to modernize was a historical inevitability.

"It was a normal development," Cardinal Jorge María Mejía, who was Cardinal Librarian from 1998 to 2003, just after Boyle left, told me in Rome. We met on a hot afternoon in his large apartment in Trastevere, in the Palazzo San Calisto, a five-story residence for elderly cardinals that stands just across a little piazza from a restaurant, the Arco di San Calisto, that is a favorite among Roman foodies. When I knocked on his front door, which opens onto a terrace filled with potted flowering plants and small trees, Mejía, who is eighty-seven now, answered himself. A smallish, fine-featured Argentine who speaks a precise, old-fashioned English, he was wearing a short-sleeved white shirt, a white dog collar, dark trousers, and Birkenstocks. Briskly ushering me through the high-ceilinged foyer, he showed me into a spacious, book-filled sitting room whose coffee table prominently featured, among other bric-a-brac, a sizable menorah. (In 1977, Mejía was named Secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.)

The Cardinal has a sly sense of humor. When I asked him whether being appointed Librarian was something he'd wanted, he shot me an amused look. "In the Roman Curia you never get what you *want!*" He laughed and then added, "Well, it's very *rare* that you get what you want!" He explained to me that in 1998, at the moment he'd been preparing for his retirement—he was then seventy-five, the age at which cardinals typically retire—John Paul II asked him to assume the responsibilities of Librarian. "The Pope thought I had the qualities to take this job, and I was very happy to do it," he said. Among those qualities, clearly, were a certain forthrightness and a dexterous way with the media; it was Mejía who oversaw the release of files from the Papacy of Pius XII after that Pope's relations with the Hitler regime had prompted a public outcry.

Mejía was eager to point out that although the decision to confront the Vat's physical and structural problems came just after his departure, certain aspects of the modernization—the decision to use computer tagging for the printed books, for instance—had already become a priority when he arrived. "I should like to note," he told me, pointing with a smile at my digital recorder, "that the first step in that direction had mostly to do with security. You know, the library is enormous, and it's open to robberies or disappearances of material. When I took office, I was given a kind of list of material most recently disappeared. It was not *very* large but it was, anyway, very *unpleasant*." The Vat has indeed a long history of security problems. When Montaigne visited, in 1581, he noticed that the books were chained to the desks; four centuries later, in 1987, an art-history professor from Ohio State University waltzed out of the Vat with pages from a fourteenth-century manuscript that had once belonged to Petrarch. These problems stem in part from the fact that it has always operated on optimistic assumptions about scholarly integrity, and networks of scholarly acquaintance, that date back to the Middle Ages. (To this day, all you need to gain entry to the Vat is a letter of recommendation from an institution known to the Librarian or the Prefect.)

Mejía recalled that his Prefect at the time, Raffaele Farina—now the Cardinal Librarian—knew of a company that did computerized tagging, and asked for proposals. "They offered to place a chip in each printed book, so the position of this book could be controlled at any moment. While I was there, the first trial was done, and it came out very well, so we decided to do the rest. And, you know, the library has over a million and a half printed volumes. But now you can follow each printed book to see where it should be—and where it should not be."

Far more important for the many scholars who have no ready access to the library, the process of digitizing images from the Vat's collection of illuminated manuscripts had begun—an undertaking that is very much in keeping, in ways that Nicholas V couldn't have imagined, with that Pope's dream of "the common convenience of the learned." "A decision was taken," Cardinal Mejía went on, making use of the curious passive construction that, I'd noticed, he favored when speaking of events that occurred during his tenure, "to digitalize the miniatures"—the hand-painted illuminations in the manuscripts—"so people could have access to the miniatures without seeing the manuscripts, which we try to keep as much as possible in their own places, because they're so precious. So now the Vatican has a site for these images, and you can click on an image and see the illuminations. There's access for anybody."

It is hard to overstate the importance that this ideal of intellectual sharing has for the scholars who work at the Vat. The amplitude and comprehensiveness of the library's collection has created an

intangible analogue—a unique culture of intellectual breadth and openness. "It's a collection that tried to be universal," Ingrid Rowland said. "It's not just that they have these things. It has this kind of space, this civilization."

Carmela Vircillo Franklin, an Italian-born medievalist who teaches at Columbia and recently stepped down as director of the American Academy in Rome, spoke about how distinctive the Vat's "civilization" is for scholars. "In other libraries," she told me, "for example, the Bibliothèque Nationale, in Paris, there are different manuscript reading rooms for different language groups, but at the Vatican Library—whether you were working on an Ethiopian manuscript, a Greek manuscript, a Latin manuscript—you worked in the same room. And then you'd take a break at the wonderful coffee bar in the Cortile." (Pretty much all the Vat regulars wax ecstatic about the coffee bar.) "There's a social aspect," she explained. "You are talking with friends, with colleagues, with people you've maybe just met, about important things, things of the mind. It's almost like being in the Platonic Academy."

To this community of scholars the forward-looking Boyle—who dreamed of extending that fellowship by virtual means—was inevitably something of a hero. "Boyle really saw that the library had to modernize," Anthony Grafton told me. "He saw in the nineteen-eighties that digitization was necessary, and he had a vision of basically having a downloadable manuscript collection of the Vatican Library." Like Popes, Prefects of the Vatican Library tend to be either able administrators or inspired shepherds of their flocks; Boyle, who spent much of his career in and around the University of Toronto, was clearly the latter. Carmela Franklin recalled a "wonderful" period in her scholarly life when Boyle was Prefect. "He brought with him this kind of *disponibilità*"—availability, openness—"this kind of egalitarian approach to scholarship. The modernization of the library really began with him."

According to some, Boyle's fierce protectiveness of the library and its treasures may have contributed to his downfall. One story I heard exemplified the problematic divide between the Vatican Library as an independent knowledge base and the Vatican Library as an extension of the Vatican itself. "John Paul was not an academic," a Vatican observer told me. "He had his own ideas about cultural heritage and the stewardship involved in it." In 1990, on a visit to Mexico, the Pope returned a rare medical manuscript that had been taken out of the country in the sixteenth century. "He thought he could just take a manuscript out of the Vat and hand it out as a gift," the observer said. "Leonard Boyle remonstrated with the Pope and told him it wasn't his library, it was the pontifical library, but to no avail." When the trouble over his fund-raising connections erupted, Boyle found himself without crucial support in the Curia.

It's possible to see the selection of Raffaele Farina as Boyle's successor as the Curia's way of reasserting authority. Boyle was a distinguished academic and beloved teacher; by contrast, Cardinal Farina, who was born in 1933 and studied theology and Church history, is perceived more as an efficient administrator. "Someone said to me once, 'I don't know what Farina looks like'—because he always stayed in his office," Carmela Franklin told me. "Boyle was always out in the reading room—any grad student could go in there and say, 'Can you help me read this manuscript?'" After the Boyle scandal, the Curia may well have wanted a Prefect who focussed more on the needs of the Holy See. Jacqueline Hamesse, a Belgian authority on the reception of Aristotle in the Middle Ages, who told me that she'd bought an apartment near the Vat to be close to its collections, recalled that Boyle had allowed a doctoral seminar on medieval documents to meet inside the Vat—a huge boon to the students, who don't easily get access to such important manuscripts. Hamesse, a tall, gray-haired woman with an undramatic, no-nonsense demeanor, recalled with unwonted heat that Farina had, "without explanation," put an end to the seminar meetings soon after taking over. To me, Massimo Ceresa explained that the meetings were moved to a different location as part of Farina's policy of dedicating the library "to scholars' reading and nothing else"; according to Farina, noise from the classes had been disturbing some Vat users.

In the Prefect's assertion of his prerogative you get a sense of that other Vatican—an institution whose structure predates modernity by a millennium. "Remember, this is part of a court," Anthony Grafton told me. "It's like 'Wolf Hall.' People forget, because the Vatican has some qualities of a modern administration, but basically it's a court." The Holy See's communications can indeed be vexed in the ways peculiar to transactions between courts, with their hermetic, inward-turned thinking, and the modern world; the P.R. blunders the Vatican has made in the past are not unlike those which Buckingham Palace has made. In April, 2007, for instance, Farina announced that the library would be closing for three full years, starting in July. As far as the Vatican was concerned, there was nothing else to be done: attempts at solving the building's physical problems had proved awkward, with construction workers trying to tiptoe around scholars, and conditions had reached a point where immediate intervention was necessary. But the announcement caught many scholars by surprise; for foreign academics, who plan sabbaticals and leaves long in advance in order to work at the Vat, it was little short of disastrous. Farina's attempt to explain matters came off as defensive, even testy: "The foreign press and radio of the English language gave the announcement in a manner that wasn't completely correct. Fortunately, it was then presented in a full and comprehensible manner by the agencies of the American Catholic press."

The current Prefect, Monsignor Cesare Pasini, was appointed in June, 2007, a month before the Vat shut down, and thus has the distinction of being the only Prefect in its history to preside mostly over a closed institution. Pasini is a youthful sixty, with lots of dark hair and easygoing good looks; if you were casting a sitcom about an attractive widower whose kids were scheming to get him remarried, his is

the kind of face you'd want. When we talked at a long wooden table in his large, spare office—the most eye-catching decoration was on the floor, where the Papal arms were picked out in black, gold, and cream *pietra dura*—he displayed both the diplomatic agility of a born company man and the intellectual enthusiasm of a born scholar. He was never anything less than admiringly deferential when speaking of Farina. ("The Cardinal Librarian is my predecessor as Prefect, and so he's got all the experience of a Prefect. And I was happy to profit from his experience.") But as we talked I had the feeling that he'd scrutinized Farina's tenure as both Prefect and Librarian and was determined to learn from it. Among other things, Pasini has demonstrated considerable shrewdness in the communications department. Over the three years when the library was closed, he created an online newsletter, contributing regular, friendly, and meticulously detailed progress reports. On the day of the reopening, he announced that although the renovation was now complete, he intended to continue the newsletter in the interests of "mutual understanding." There are now more than seventeen thousand subscribers.

Even better, as far as many of the Vat's users are concerned, Pasini has the expertise of a legitimate scholar and the hands-on experience of a distinguished librarian. He is an expert on Byzantine Greek hagiographical manuscripts, with a number of publications to his name; before coming to the Vat he was the Vice-Prefect of the great Ambrosian Library, in Milan, where he was born and grew up. Of the Vat, he told me, "I got to know the library in a way that scholars know it, as a much more lay place." His understanding of what scholars need has impressed Carmela Franklin, who mentioned how hard Pasini's staff had worked, after the closing was announced, to provide copies of important texts to two young scholars who had already been accepted at the American Academy in Rome and were planning to do research at the Vat.

Pasini may well be the rare Vatican Prefect who instinctively understands both the demands of the scholarly community and the concerns of his bosses within the Curia. Even the way he speaks conflates the humanistic and the ecclesiastical. "There is the possibility of entering the mystery of culture," he told me, smiling, as we sat at the plain wooden table. "Culture is also a kind of mystery. The mystery of scholarship, the mystery of the spirit of humanism. The patient study that allows someone to know something that perhaps hasn't been known before—or perhaps something that someone has studied before, but one can go another step further, testing, verifying, correcting."

Pasini used the word "mystery" a number of times, and when I asked him what he meant he spoke with noticeable emotion about the sense of invisible collaboration he has felt with earlier generations of scholars. "Since 1978"—the year he finished his studies—"I've been sharing with others this possibility of entering the world of scholarship, entering the mystery of scholarship—the mystery of truth, I'd even call it. These texts are pieces, fragments, of the truth. If I discover, for instance, that the person who copied such and such a manuscript was called Ioannikios, I've got a piece of *truth*." He paused for a moment, and—in terms whose cadences reminded me of the famous heavenly command that resulted in St. Augustine's conversion, "*Tolle lege*" ("Take up and read")—recalled the day in 2007 when he was nominated to his post. "On that June 21st, they called me and said, 'Come and see.' And then I was on the inside."

At the end of each of the interviews I conducted, I'd ask my interlocutor what items in the Vat's collection he or she thought it would be crucial for a visitor to see. More often than not, the responses reflected the enthusiasms of whomever I happened to be talking to. For Ingrid Rowland, it was the Vatican Virgil; for Anthony Grafton, it was Lorenzo Valla's translation of Thucydides; for Jacqueline Hamesse, it was an autograph of Thomas Aquinas. Cardinal Mejía mentioned both a beautifully illuminated Haggadah and the Bible of Federico di Montefeltro ("Botticelli did part of it!"); Cesare Pasini named the Codex B, a fourth-century manuscript of the Bible in Greek (he recalled having seen it as a student and—although forbidden to touch it—having grazed "just the edge" with a finger). I knew what I wanted to see from the minute I walked in, and when I told Massimo Ceresa what it was he smiled and said he thought he could find it. He left me alone in the manuscript reading room and, after a few minutes, returned, holding it out to me.

"Vaticanus Graecus 1001," the manuscript of Procopius' "Secret History," is surprisingly small—"surprisingly" because you half expect a book that had such an impact to be physically big. Its pages are about ten inches high and six and a half inches wide, and are of a grayish color. On these pages there unfurled, for page upon stiff page, the dense, black Greek letters that had spelled the end of the Emperor Justinian's good reputation in the world. In the wide margins were delicately inked comments and queries that, I realized with astonishment, were those of Nicolò Alamanni himself—the notes he had made while preparing the first printed edition of this hand-copied text, the first of a series of technological advances that would, improbably as it must once have seemed, take Procopius from the sixth century through the Renaissance and beyond, into the age of photography, digital scanning, and computer tagging.

Most classicists don't deal directly with the ancient manuscripts; they rely, instead, on people like Alamanni, people who looked at the source manuscripts, corrected the errors that had crept in through centuries of copying and recopying, and then published the texts for the convenience of scholars. So it can be an emotional experience to hold in your hand something like Alamanni's copy of Procopius, which for a thousand years was the only object in the world that prevented a big chunk of history—a fragile but crucial truth—from being lost. I sat quietly with the text, thinking of how many hands it had to pass through to reach the Vatican Library, how overwhelming the odds had been against its survival into the digitized present, with its heady promise of infinite availability in time and space. Ceresa stood quietly to the side, letting me have my moment. Then I handed the book back to him, and he disappeared into the stacks to return it to where it belonged. ♦