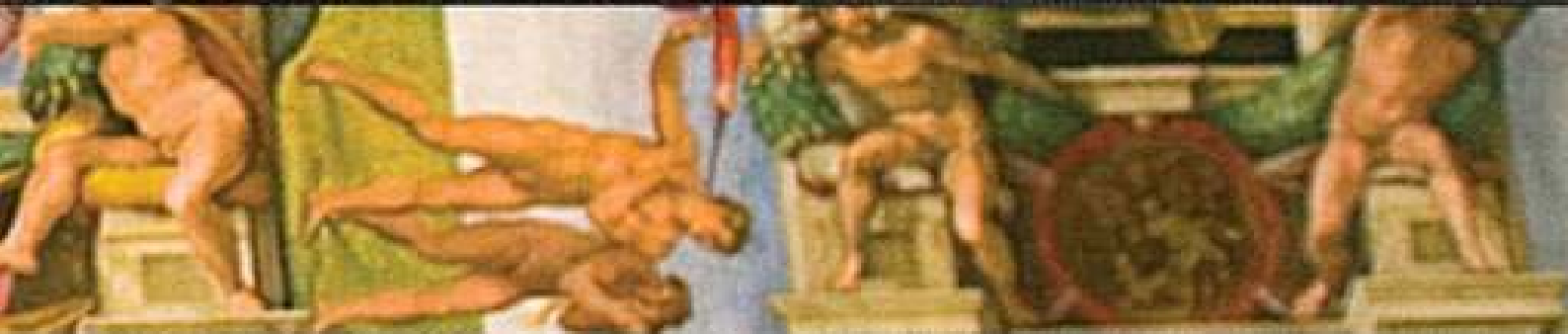


*The*  
SISTINE  
SECRETS



MICHELANGELO'S  
FORBIDDEN MESSAGES  
*in the*  
HEART *of the* VATICAN

BENJAMIN BLECH & ROY DOLINER

FOREWORD BY ENRICO BRUSCHINI,  
Official Art Historian of the U.S. Embassy in Rome

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THE  
SISTINE  
SECRETS

*Michelangelo's Forbidden Messages  
in the Heart of the Vatican*

Benjamin Blech & Roy Doliner



HarperOne

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# Epigraph

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*For Martha and Marvin Usdin, the two youngest  
guardian angels I have ever known*

—Roy Doliner

*For my family—the angels God sent me to bring  
joy to my journey through life*

—Rabbi Benjamin Blech



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*Conoscersi è il miglior modo per capirsi—  
capirsi è il solo modo per amarsi*

*(To know each other is the best way to  
understand each other—to understand each  
other is the only way to love each other.)*

This wise and ancient maxim spoke directly to my heart as soon as I began to read this most fascinating book by Rabbi Benjamin Blech and Roy Doliner.

This adage is a valuable observation not only for relationships between human beings; it speaks perhaps even more profoundly with reference to interactions between religions as well as to dealing among nations.

In order to truly know each other, it is indispensable to know how to listen to each other, and above all to *want* to listen to each other.

It seems to me that one of the important achievements of this groundbreaking book, among many others, is that it powerfully and clearly fulfills this mission. It pierces through the veil of countless puzzlements and hypotheses that, along with indisputable admiration, have always accompanied my visit to the Sistine Chapel. By filling in blanks resulting from a lack of understanding of teaching foreign to Christianity—but well known to Michelangelo—the Sistine Chapel can now speak to us in a way it has never been understood before.

We have always known that Pope Sixtus IV wanted the Sistine Chapel to have the same dimensions as the Temple of Solomon, just as they were recorded by the prophet Samuel in the Bible in the book of Kings I (6:2). In the past, art and religion experts explained that this was purposefully done to demonstrate that there is no contradiction between the Old and New Testaments, between the Bible and the Gospels, between the Jewish and the Christian religions.

Only now, through reading this remarkable book, have I learned—with wonder, as an art historian and with a certain embarrassment and sorrow as a Catholic—that this construction was considered a religious offense by the Jews. The Talmud, the collection and explication of the rabbinic tradition, clearly legislated that no one could build a “functioning” copy of the Holy Temple of Solomon in any location other than the holy Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

It is well to remember that this took place six centuries ago. In more recent times, many outdated insensitivities have thankfully been replaced with understanding and mutual respect. In this light, Pope John Paul II visited the Great Synagogue of Rome on April 13, 1986, and during that historic event the pontiff turned to the Jewish people, calling them for the first time, with respect and love, “our elder brothers and sisters!”

In January 2005, this very same great pontiff, feeling himself nearing the end of his earthly existence, made a gesture as historic as it was unique. He invited to the Vatican one hundred and sixty rabbis and cantors from all over the world. Organizing the encounter was Pave the Way Foundation, an international, interreligious association born out of the idea of creating and reinforcing bridges between the Jewish world and the Christian world. The purpose of the meeting was for the pope to receive a final blessing from the representatives of our “elder brothers and sisters,” while at the same

time further strengthening the humanitarian ties between the two faiths.

This historic encounter turned out to be the very last audience of Pope Wojtila with any group. Three Jewish religious leaders had the privilege of being the first and only rabbis in the world to give a blessing to a pope in the name of the Jewish people. One of them was Benjamin Blech, coauthor of this volume, a professor of Talmud at Yeshiva University, an internationally noted teacher, lecturer, spiritual leader, and author of numerous books on spirituality read by people of all faiths.

I had the pleasure to personally meet the other author of this book, Roy Doliner, the day of the world premiere of the film *The Nativity Story*. It was the first time the Vatican had officially granted the use of the majestic Hall of Audiences for an artistic-cultural event.

Because of his profound knowledge of Jewish doctrine and history, and as a noted proponent of Talmudic study, Roy had been selected by the film's producers and its director, Catherine Hardwicke, as the official Judaic-religious-historical consultant. For the historical consultant dealing with Roman history and the life of Herod the Great, they had chosen yours truly. Through the production of *The Nativity Story*, Roy and I became friends.

That is how on several occasions Roy and I have been able to visit the Sistine Chapel in a very special way—after closing hours—and each visit has been a chance to see the masterpiece of Michelangelo in a new and different way.

For these reasons, when I was asked to present this book, I accepted with pleasure. Having now read this work I find myself awed not only by the great scholarship of the authors, but also by the enormous and extremely interesting amount of new historic, artistic, and religious ideas contained within.

I had always wondered why, every time I entered the Sistine Chapel, not even one figure from the New Testament appeared on that splendid ceiling. I have finally found the most convincing answer here in this book.

The authors lead us on a true journey of discovery of “other” meanings, of diverse ways of seeing and understanding that which had always been right in front of our eyes and that now seem completely different.

With their guidance, we come to realize that Michelangelo performed an immense and ingenious act of concealment within the Sistine Chapel in order to convey numerous messages, veiled but powerful, that preach reconciliation—reconciliation between reason and faith, between the Jewish Bible and the New Testament, and between Christian and Jew. Incredibly, we discover how the artist felt the need to communicate these dangerous concepts under perilous conditions at great personal risk to himself.

How was Michelangelo able to accomplish this daring act? The authors reveal that at times Michelangelo uses codes or symbolic allusions that are partially hidden; at times, signs that can only be picked up and understood by certain religious, political, or esoteric groups. Still other times, all one needs is a mind free from preconceptions and open to new suggestions or ideas in order to understand his messages. It is even more interesting to realize that these symbols and allusions were done without being recognized by his papal patron. They were audaciously conceived in order to alleviate the frustration of the artist who, unable to openly have his say, wanted somehow to “declare” his message.

The book leads us, almost by the hand, in a documented but captivating style, to decode the hidden symbols. It gave me great pleasure to join with them, albeit with a bit of perplexity at the outset. It is certainly not easy to have to take a second look at the reassuring certainties that have accompanied us through life; but we cannot close our eyes, our mind, or our heart to those who have seen, from a different perspective, that which we have always taken for granted. Even if I might not share all of the

interesting, intriguing, and at times stupefying new ideas, I am certain that this book is truly a new way to view the Sistine Chapel. It will be appreciated and treasured by all those who are serious and interested in the great ideas of religion, art, and the history of civilization. It will cause heated debate to spread forth for years to come.

The authors alert us to the fact that in order to completely appreciate the miracle that is the Sistine Chapel, the visitor needs to comprehend Michelangelo's motivations, his background, his youthful years of intellectual ferment in the palace of the de' Medicis in Florence, the still little-known ups and downs of his entire career, in addition to his fascination with Neo-Platonism and his interest in Judaism and its mystical teachings.

What has hardly ever been stressed before is an idea that Blech and Doliner demonstrate with brilliant insight. While the Renaissance was certainly influenced by the ancient Greek and Roman myths, we need to at last acknowledge the remarkable influence, especially on Michelangelo, of the hermetic and esoteric traditions of the Jewish Kabbalah.

The event that completely changed the life of the thirteen-year-old Michelangelo—already a genius, but entirely uneducated—occurred around 1488, when Lorenzo de' Medici, admiring the talent of this artistic prodigy, welcomed him into his palace like a son and had him instructed along with his own heirs as a member of the family. In the regal palace of the de' Medicis, the young Michelangelo came into contact with the most brilliant minds of that time, such as Poliziano, Marsilio Ficino, and Pico della Mirandola. Their ideas influenced and shaped the still-pristine mind of the young artist. Neo-Platonism became his new ideal. From Marsilio Ficino, who knew Hebrew and was a scholar of Jewish traditions, and from Pico della Mirandola, humanist and philosopher, and also a great expert in Jewish language and culture, Michelangelo learned his first concepts of esoterica, gained a deep knowledge of the Bible, and also knew the teachings of the Torah, the Kabbalah, the Talmud, and the Midrash, the methods of biblical exegesis.

All of this the authors convincingly show us find powerful echoes in the Sistine. Only with this background can we fully understand Michelangelo's meaning and messages. This becomes all the more evident after the perfect cleaning of the stupendous frescoes of Michelangelo, which had been obscured by centuries of thick smoke, dust, and misguided attempts at preservation. Only today can we fully savor the beauty and the true meaning of the Sistine Chapel.

The "cleaning"—and not the "restoration," as has been erroneously written—not only brought the Chapel back to its original splendor, but also put an end to many ill-informed disputes that dated back to the beginning of the work. I was invited numerous times to climb up on the scaffolding to observe the cleaning labors, and I was able to personally share in the joy of actually seeing the frescoes from only twenty centimeters (about seven and a half inches) away. Above all, I could bear witness in my books to the accuracy of the work of these specialized technicians, carried out with talent and love. Just think, a team of twelve experts was hard at work for twelve years in order to finish the job!

After the cleaning, we were able to verify that the dirt had covered up not only the colors, but had also hidden the numerous messages that had already been purposely "veiled," left inside the paintings by the great Florentine. Now we can say with assurance that the original plan for the Sistine Chapel by its patron, Pope Julius II, was purposely thwarted. Julius had wanted the Sistine to be the eternal reminder of the extravagant success of the papal family and to feature Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the twelve apostles, and almost certainly John the Baptist.

For the first time in the history of the Sistine, Blech and Doliner make us understand just how Michelangelo was able to subvert the entire project in order to secretly promote his own ideal, especially those linked to humanism, Neo-Platonism, and universal tolerance.

Clearly they explain how this Florentine genius was able to paint the largest fresco in the Catholic world without even a single Christian figure in it and, other than the sibyls, managed to portray only figures from the Hebrew Bible. Even more amazingly, they tell us how he evaded papal censorship of his opinionated work with his private agenda.

It is also significant that the Sistine frescoes are not only faithful to the Hebrew Bible, but even more so to the Kabbalah, the Jewish doctrine of mystical and esoteric character. In this book we find comprehensive replies to most of the questions that for centuries have tormented experts in theology and art history, as well as the average researchers and aficionados.

For example, in the fresco of the *Original Sin*:

- Why does the serpent have arms?
- Why is the forbidden Tree of Knowledge not an apple tree, but a fig tree?
- In the previous panel, why does Eve seem to be emerging from a “side” of Adam, and not from his rib?

The answers are all given by the Kabbalah and described brilliantly in this book.

Another valuable insight demonstrated by the authors is the closeness, if not the admiration, that Michelangelo felt for the Jews. I found particularly fascinating their explanation of a detail that was entirely unknown until now, after the recent cleaning of the frescoes, with the subsequent reappearance of the original colors that had been darkened and covered by soot and dust. Not to give away too much, it involves a yellow circle on the cloak (to be exact, on the left arm) of Aminadab, one of the ancestors of Christ, similar to the yellow badge of shame the Fourth Lateran Council ordered the Jews, in 1215, to sew on their clothing. The incredible and unprecedented photo can be seen in chapter 9. To make this even more relevant, this portrait of Aminadab is positioned right above the place of the papal throne of Julius II.

Almost certainly, some of the instructors in the school of the de' Medicis were rabbis and had explained to Michelangelo about the Hebrew alphabet and the esoteric significance of each letter. This is amply demonstrated by the Hebrew letters that are hidden in the gestures and the stances of many figures in the paintings.

Even in *The Last Judgment*, the influence of Jewish culture is quite evident. The enormous fresco is clearly in the shape of the Tablets of the Law of Moses. This is due not only to the form of the chapel, but also to the fact that Michelangelo, before painting the *Judgment*, had covered over the two windows that were a large part of the wall over the altar, and had a new wall built on top of the original one.

One exquisite final touch: Few if any people have noticed that Michelangelo placed two Jews in Paradise, very close to the powerful figure of Jesus. If you look carefully, over the shoulder of the youthful blond Christ and painted above St. Peter, two Jews are quite clearly displayed—you can see them in the photo at the beginning of chapter 15. They are easily recognizable not only for their characteristic facial traits, but also because the first man is wearing the typical double-pointed hat that Jewish males were forced to put on, in order to reinforce the medieval prejudice that these people, being the offspring of the devil, had horns. The second man has on the yellow cap that the Jews were forced to wear in public.

At the end of this fascinating reading experience, the readers will realize that Rabbi Benjamin Blech and Roy Doliner have guided us to see in a brand-new light not only the Sistine Chapel but almost all of Michelangelo's artwork, including the monument to Julius II, the famous *Moses*, and the

various statues of the pietà, scattered about in Italy.

~~We will come to appreciate, as the authors point out, that the real message of his masterpiece that Michelangelo created a true bridge between the two faiths of Judaism and Christianity, between humanity and God, and, perhaps most difficult of all, between each person and his or her spiritual self.~~

Just as the work of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel changed forever the world of art, so will this book change forever the way to view and, above all, to understand the work of Michelangelo!

**Enrico Bruschini.** Professor Bruschini is one of the most esteemed art experts in all of Rome and the Vatican Museums. He is an international lecturer, consultant, and the author of numerous books on Italian art history, including *In the Footsteps of Popes*, *Vatican Masterpieces*, and *Rome and the Vatican*—the last two titles published by the Vatican itself. In 1984, he was named Official Art Historian of the United States Embassy in Rome, a lifelong title, and was subsequently appointed First Art Curator. In 1989 he was named the Official Guide of Rome and guided Presidents Gerald Ford, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush during their official visits to Rome and Vatican City. To learn more about him, please visit his site at: [www.profenrico.com](http://www.profenrico.com), or write him at [enicobruschini@libero.it](mailto:enicobruschini@libero.it).



# PREFACE

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Every year more than four million visitors from all over the world throng to the Vatican Museums, the most-visited museum complex on earth. They come for one overriding reason—to see the Sistine Chapel, the holiest chapel in the Christian world. Viewers—Christians, Jews, Muslims, atheists, and lovers, and the merely curious—not only marvel at its aesthetic beauty but are moved by its history and its spiritual teachings. The major attraction, without a doubt, is the incomparable vista of fresco on its ceiling and its altar wall, the work of Michelangelo Buonarroti, universally acknowledged as one of humanity’s greatest artists.

But very few of the millions of awestruck spectators who enter the Sistine know that the pope’s own chapel, built in the heart of the Vatican, is a full-size copy of the Holy of Holies in Solomon’s ancient Temple in Jerusalem.

They would also surely be amazed to discover that Michelangelo himself embedded secret messages inside the chapel. Even more shocking, these messages espoused ideas that struck at the heart of the papacy.

Unknown to most viewers is the dramatic truth that these frescoes contain a lost mystical message of universal love, dangerously contrary to Church doctrine in Michelangelo’s day, but true to the original teachings of the Bible as well as to much of contemporary liberal Christian thought.

Driven by the truths he had come to recognize during his years of study in private nontraditional schooling in Florence, truths rooted in his involvement with Judaic texts as well as Kabbalistic training that conflicted with approved Christian doctrine, Michelangelo needed to find a way to let viewers discern what he truly believed. He could not allow the Church to forever silence his soul. And what the Church would not permit him to communicate openly, he ingeniously found a way to convey to those diligent enough to learn his secret language.

Unfortunately these messages were lost and went unheeded for five centuries. The man famous for defining genius as “eternal patience” must have found solace for his inability to voice his disagreement with the Vatican in the hope that eventually there would be those who would “crack his code” and grasp what he was really saying. Only now, thanks to diligent scholarship as well as the new clarity afforded by the chapel’s extensive cleaning, have they been rediscovered and deciphered. Michelangelo spoke truth to power, and his insights, ingeniously concealed in his work, can at last be heard.

All this is not speculative fiction, but, as we will convincingly prove, completely, incredibly, *true*.

This is the startling and provocative thesis that *The Sistine Secrets* will for the first time reveal—and forcefully demonstrate. It will show how Michelangelo incorporated into his religious masterpiece a stunning number of hidden messages to the Church of his time, messages that resonate to this day with their daring appeal for reconciliation between reason and faith, between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and among all those who share a sincere quest for true faith and service of God.

Prepare to unlearn everything that you thought you knew about the Sistine Chapel and Michelangelo’s masterpieces. Just as the recent cleaning of the frescoes removed layer after layer of tarnish and darkness accumulated over the centuries, this book will endeavor to remove centuries of prejudice, censorship, and ignorance from one of the world’s most famous and beloved art treasures.

We invite you to join us on an incredible journey of discovery.







# BOOK ONE

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## *In the Beginning*



### WHAT IS THE SISTINE CHAPEL?

*And let them build for Me a Sanctuary,  
that I may dwell in their midst.*

—exodus 25:8

**O**N FEBRUARY 18, 1564, the Renaissance died in Rome. Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, known to all simply as Michelangelo, passed away at age eighty-nine in his frugal home what is today Piazza Venezia. His body was prepared to be entombed inside the nearby Basilica of the Holy Apostles. Today, this church, Santissimi Apostoli, is an amalgam of many times and styles: its top floor is from the nineteenth century, the middle floor is seventeenth-century Baroque, and the ground floor is pure Renaissance from the second half of the fifteenth century. But what is most interesting about Michelangelo's intended burial place is that the original part of the church—the only part that existed in 1564—was designed by none other than Baccio Pontelli, the same man who planned the structure of the Sistine Chapel. The church where Michelangelo was supposed to be entombed is important for other reasons as well.



*View of the Sistine Chapel from the roof of St. Peter's Cathedral. See Fig. 1 in the insert.*

In a crypt beneath the ground-floor level of the church are the tombs of Saints James and Philip, two of the apostles going back to the life of Jesus. Deeper still, if we were allowed to dig beneath the crypt, we would soon come upon remains of ancient Imperial Rome, beneath that, Republican Rome, and finally, perhaps some of Bronze Age Rome.

This makes the church a metaphor for the entire Eternal City: a place of layer upon layer of history, of accumulations of countless cultures, of confrontations between the sacred and the profane, the holy and the pagan—and of multiple hidden secrets.

To understand Rome is to recognize that it is a city swarming with secrets—more than three millennia of mysteries. And nowhere in Rome are there more secrets than in the Vatican.

## THE VATICAN

The very name *Vatican* comes from a surprising source. It is neither Latin nor Greek, nor is it of biblical origin. In fact, the word we associate with the Church has a pagan origin. More than twenty-eight centuries ago, even before the legendary founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus, there was a people called the Etruscans. Much of what we think of as Roman culture and civilization actually comes from the Etruscans. Even though we are still trying to master their very difficult language, we already know a great deal about them. We know that, like the Hebrews and the Romans, the Etruscans did not bury their dead inside the walls of their cities. For that reason, on a hillside slope outside the confines of their ancient city in the area that was destined to become Rome, the Etruscans established

a very large cemetery. The name of the pagan Etruscan goddess who guarded this *necropolis*, or city of the dead, was *Vatika*.

*Vatika* has several other related meanings in ancient Etruscan. It was the name of a bitter grape that grew wild on the slope, which the peasants made into what became infamous as one of the worst and cheapest wines in the ancient world. The name of this wine, which also referred to the slope where it was produced, was *Vatika*. It was also the name of a strange weed that grew on the graveyard slope. When chewed, it produced wild hallucinations, much like the effect of peyote mushrooms; thus, *vaticum* represented what we would call today a cheap high. In this way, the word passed into Latin as a synonym for “prophetic vision.”

Much later, the slope became the *circus*, or stadium, of the mad emperor Nero. It was here, according to Church tradition, that Saint Peter was executed, crucified upside down, and then buried nearby. This became the destination of so many pilgrims that the emperor Constantine, upon becoming half-Christian, founded a shrine on the spot, which the Romans continued to call the Vatican Slope. A century after Constantine, the popes started building the papal palace there.

What does “the Vatican” mean today? Because of its history, the name has a number of different connotations. It can refer to the Basilica of St. Peter; to the Apostolic Palace of the popes with more than fourteen hundred rooms; to the Vatican Museums complex with more than two thousand rooms; to the political/social/religious hierarchy that is considered the spiritual leadership of about one-fifth of the human race; or to the world’s smallest official country of *Città del Vaticano* (Vatican City). It is indeed strange to consider that this tiniest country on earth, which could fit eight times over inside Central Park in New York City, contains within it the world’s largest and costliest church, the world’s largest and most luxurious palace, and one of the world’s largest museums.

## REPLACING THE TEMPLE

Most fascinating of all, though, may well be a place within the ancient fortress walls of Vatican City whose symbolic meaning is unknown to almost all its visitors. Its theological significance can best be realized by noting that this Catholic effort was something explicitly forbidden to Jews. In the Talmud, the ancient holy commentaries of the greatest Jewish sages spanning more than five centuries, it was clearly legislated that no one may construct a functioning full-sized copy of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem in any location other than the Temple Mount itself (Tractate Megillah, 10a). This was decreed in order to avoid any possible bloody religious schisms, such as later happened in Christianity (Roman Catholicism; Eastern and Greek Orthodoxy; Protestantism—and their centuries of internecine warfare) and Islam (Sunni and Shi’ite, who are sadly still killing each other around the globe).

Six centuries ago, however, a Catholic architect who was not constrained by Talmudic laws did exactly that. He designed and built an incredible, full-sized copy of the inner sanctum, or the Holy of Holies, of King Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem—right in the middle of Renaissance Rome. To get the measurements and proportions exactly correct, the architect studied the writings of the prophet Samuel in the Hebrew Bible, where Samuel describes the First Holy Temple, cubit by cubit (1 Kings 6:2). This massive reproduction of the *heichal*, or rear section of the First Temple, still exists today. It is called la Cappella Sistina—the Sistine Chapel. And this is where more than four million visitors a year come to view the incredible frescoes of Michelangelo and pay homage to a site sacred to Christianity.

Before the creation of this replica of the Jewish Temple, there had been a chapel on the same spot

during the Middle Ages. It was called la Cappella Palatina, or the Palatial Chapel. Since every European ruler had his or her own regal chapel for praying privately with the royal court, it was deemed necessary for the pope also to have one in his own palace. This was to show the power of the Church, which had to be viewed as greater than that of any secular sovereign. It is no coincidence that the word *palatina* comes from the Palatine Hill, the home of the most powerful human beings known to Western history at that point—the pagan emperors of ancient Rome. According to Roman tradition, the Palatine Hill was where Romulus had founded the city on April 21, 753 BCE. Since that time, every ruler of Rome had lived on the Palatine, constructing one spectacular palace after another. The Church was determined to prove that it was the new ruling power in Europe and hoped to spread Christendom, that is, the empire of Christianity, across the globe. This chapel was meant to be a harbinger of this coming triumph and glory, and so the pope wanted its opulence to overshadow that of any other royal chapel on earth.

Aside from the magnificent Palatina, there was also the Niccolina, a private chapel ordained by Pope Nicholas V in 1450 and decorated by the great Renaissance painter Fra Angelico. This was a tiny room in one of the older parts of the papal palace, capable of hosting the pope and a few personal aides. This is why the Palatina also had the nickname of Cappella Maggiore, the Larger Chapel, since it could hold all the papal court and its VIP guests.

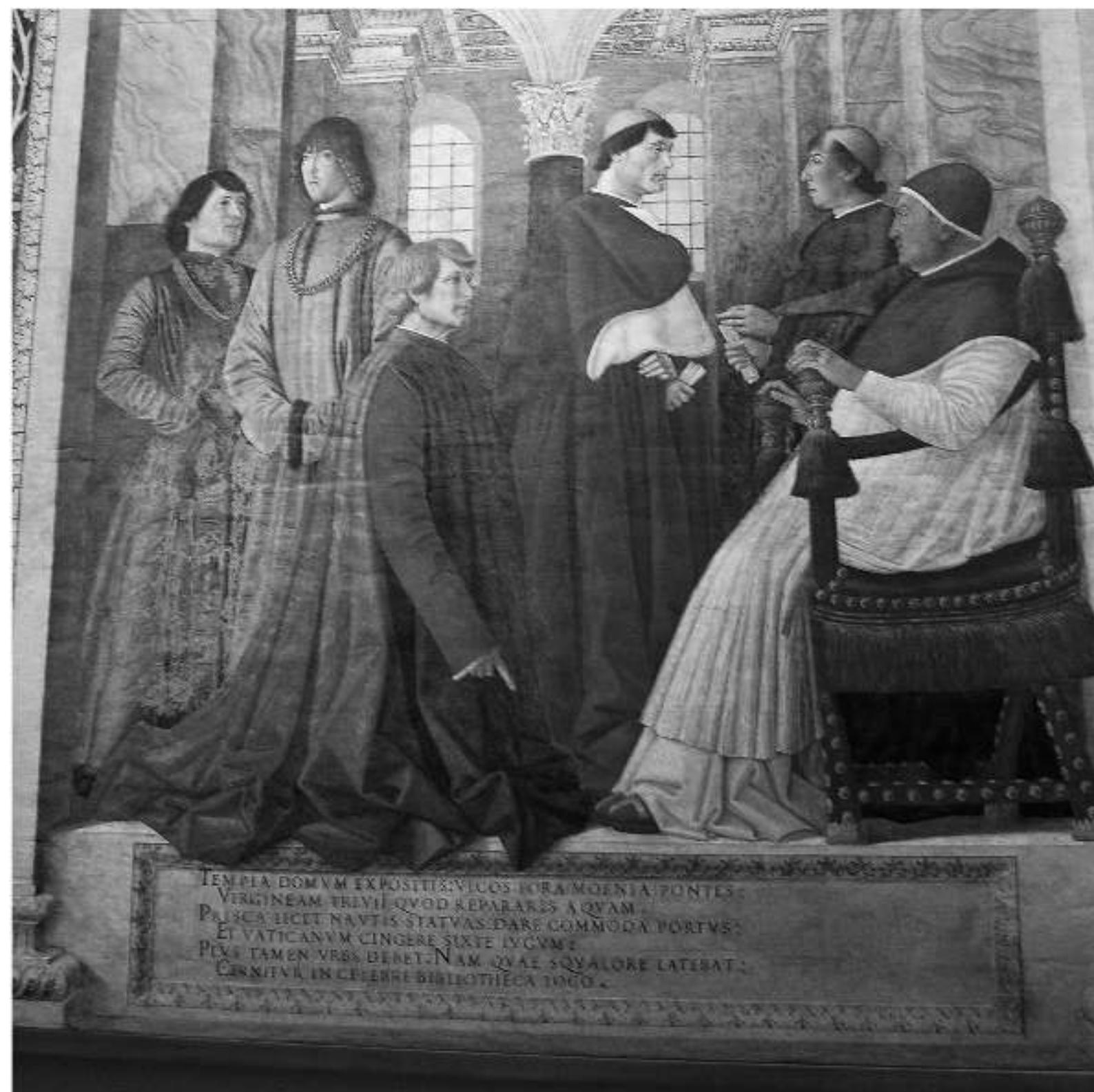
The story of the Sistine Chapel, however, begins with a pontiff who wanted the chapel to be even larger and more palatial than la Cappella Palatina.

## THE GRAND PLAN OF POPE SIXTUS

Sixtus was born Francesco della Rovere into a humble family in northwestern Italy not far from Genoa. He was a young man with an intellectual bent but no money, so it was only natural that he ended up in the priesthood. He became a Franciscan monk and slowly worked his way up the rungs of the educational and administrative ladder of the Church, finally becoming a cardinal in Rome in 1461. He was elected without much ado by a conclave of only eighteen cardinals and took the name Sixtus IV, the first pope with that name in more than a thousand years. His first acts had nothing to do with the various crises facing the Vatican, but with supplying his family with titles, estates, and privileges. He made his various and sundry nephews obscenely rich by either ordaining them as cardinals (one only sixteen years of age) or by marrying them off into wealthy, noble families. This was nothing unusual, though. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and right up to the end of the eighteenth century, it was common practice for a corrupt pope to pick his most decadent nephews to do the dirty work necessary to upgrade their entire family's material status from "well-off" to "astronomically wealthy." The word for "nephew" in Medieval Italian is *nepote*, and this system of absolute power and absolute corruption became known as *nepotismo*—and in modern English today as *nepotism*. One of Sixtus's nephews was Giuliano, who later became Pope Julius II—the man who forced Michelangelo to paint the Sistine ceiling.

When Pope Sixtus IV began his reign in 1471, the Palatine Chapel was falling apart. It was a heavy building resting perilously on the soft soil of the former Etruscan graveyard slope of the Vatican. This was a perfect symbol for the crisis of the Church itself when Sixtus took over. It was rife with plots, scandals, and schisms. Foreign rulers, such as Louis XI of France, were warring with the Vatican over the right to select and assign cardinals and bishops. Whole sections of Italy rejected papal jurisdiction. Worst of all, the Ottoman Turks were on the march. Only eighteen years earlier, Constantinople had

fallen to the Muslims, marking the death of the Christian Byzantine Empire. Shock waves reverberated throughout Christian Europe. In 1480 the Ottomans invaded the Italian peninsula itself, seizing the city of Otranto on the southeastern coast, slaughtering the archbishop and many priests in the cathedral, forcibly converting the townspeople, beheading eight hundred who refused to convert, and sawing the bishop in half. After that, they attacked several other coastal cities. Many feared that Rome itself would meet the same doom as Constantinople.



The Founding of the Vatican Library, fresco by Melozzo da Forlì, 1477 (Pinacoteca, Vatican Museums). This famous portrait shows Sixtus IV on his throne, surrounded by some of his favorite nephews, with Platina, the new head of the library, kneeling before him. The tall, dour-looking nephew facing the pope is Giuliano, the future Julius II. See Fig. 2 in the insert.



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