

Toronto Star Weekly
March 4, 1922

Behind the Scenes at Papal Election

Paris.—Once a week Anglo-American newspaper correspondents resident in Paris meet to talk shop. If the world could have a Dictaphone in the room it would have such a backstage view of European politicians, conferences, coronations and world affairs that it would spin very fast for quite a time from the shock.

All week the correspondents have been mailing or cabling dispatches giving the news as they saw it as trained professional observers. For a couple of hours each Wednesday they talk it over as they saw it as human beings watching human beings instead of newspapermen with diplomas.

“They crowned the pope on a plain pine board throne, put together just for that,” says one of the men who has spent twenty-one days in Rome covering the death of the pope [Benedict IV] and the coronation of the new pontiff [Pius XI] for one of the big wire services.

“It reminded me of a fraternity initiation when I saw the throne and watched them getting the scenery out the day before.”

“Afterwards Johnson and I” (the name isn't Johnson, but that of a correspondent of one of the great press syndicates) “were talking with Cardinal Gasparri about why they didn't wait for the American cardinals. Johnson was asking him why they hadn't waited.

“‘We do things very quickly here,’ Gasparri said to Johnson.

“‘Perhaps you do them a little too quickly for Americans and Canadians, your eminence,’ Johnson said to him.

“‘We have to be careful about you newspapermen,’ the cardinal said to Johnson.

“‘Perhaps you wouldn't have to be if you took us more into your confidence, your eminence,’ Johnson answered.

“‘Who is that funny little fat man?’ Gasparri asked one of his attendants.

“‘You have a lot of nerve to call me fat, your eminence,’ Johnson said.”

The dialogue between the Vatican and the press did not appear in any of the news dispatches. Neither did the news dispatches tell of the difficulties the correspondents had to get their news out of Rome.

All cables were sent from the post office, where there were three rooms for newspapermen. In one of those rooms one typewriter was permitted to be used. More than one typewriter was supposed to make too much noise for the Italian correspondents to be able to think. When the Americans and Britons unlimbered Coronas there was a fearful row.

Half the people in the telegraph office were betting on the result of the balloting for the new head of the church, and when an American correspondent would tear through the crowd from the phone to write on a cable blank, he would be hemmed in by excited shouters demanding in German, French and Italian to know his news.

A papal censorship had been established and all cables containing the names of certain cardinals were automatically held up at the sending office. In the end this censorship protected some correspondents who had learned from “absolutely reliable sources” of the election of a certain cardinal who did not become the new pope, and sent cables announcing his election.

Rome was jammed for the coronation of the pope but there were only about fifty newspapermen. This is accounted for by the speed with which the election of a new pope follows the death of the old; there is not time to get men over from abroad to cover the event. Prices were sky high and double and treble rates in force for Americans.

“I found the way to get through the crowds though,” an American correspondent said. “The only people in Italy who wear silk hats are diplomats and so I bought a top hat, and whenever I wanted to get through anywhere I put it on, and it worked like a charm.”

By dint of top hats, bribes, shoving, proxies, and Italians to translate the Italian newspapers, the correspondents got the news, and sometimes got it on the wire. To read the even paragraphs in the news dispatches, you would have no idea under what conditions they were written.