

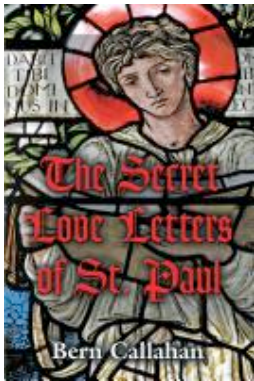
A stained glass artwork of St. Paul, depicted with a red halo and holding a book. The background features Latin text in a stone-like texture.

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# The Secret Love Letters of St. Paul

Bern Callahan



*The Secret Love Letters of Saint Paul* interweaves two stories. Soon after the death of Jesus, the Apostle Paul profoundly changes Christianity to include pagans as well as Jews. Paul's story is a tale of radical change and passion told from the point of view of Timothy, his lover. In 2026, Finn McDonagh's story begins with his rediscovery of secret letters from Paul to Timothy. The Letters take him into intrigue, secrecy, and maneuverings within the the Vatican.

# The Secret Love Letters of Saint Paul

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# The Secret Love Letters of Saint Paul



**Bern Callahan**

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First Edition

# **Finn's Story: Part 1**

**May 19, 2027**

## **The Feast of Pope Saint Celestine V<sup>1</sup> Garden of the Monastery at Abu Gosh**

“All religion is a story.”

I'm sitting in the walled garden of this Benedictine monastery just outside Jerusalem. These words are from an EDF of a vellum scroll I held in my hands just six months ago. I remember holding the original vellum copy of this text. I remember the musty smell of the old skin on which the words flowed. I remember how fragile the scroll appeared at the Monastery of Saint Catherine. The words inspire me.

First, let me tell you how I arrived at this garden.

My name is Finn McDonagh. I am thirty-one years old and a Catholic priest, at least for the time being. I am the third son of an Irish-American family from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My oldest brother followed tradition and became a lawyer, then a judge like our father. My next-oldest brother went to West Point and is now a captain serving in the third Iraq war. So, with a brother who entered law, and another who entered the military, it was expected I'd enter religion. This wasn't a problem for me, since I've always been spiritual. I'm not the youngest in our family, however. I have a younger sister who's a policewoman. You could say I'm from an interesting family.

One of my earliest memories is of my father taking me to church when I was a five-year-old boy. Going with him to church was special. On previous Sundays I had to stay home and be

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<sup>1</sup> Celestine I was a hermit, elected in July 1294 to the papacy at the age of eighty-four after he sent a letter to the College of Cardinals telling them that their two-year delay in electing the pope was angering God. Celestine's reign as pope lasted only five months. He resigned, admitting he was unable to govern the church, and was imprisoned by his successor.

“watched” by my ten-year old brother. Going to Mass felt grown up to me. Since I was still very small, and I might get fidgety during the long ceremony, Dad took me up to the choir loft. There wasn’t anyone else up there except the organist. Dad took me to the choir rail so I could look over and down into the church. It was magical to me. The people below were all looking forward. They sang together and recited prayers together. Now they were all kneeling. A man in the very front was dressed in long, colorful robes. Two boys knelt beside him on either side of a long table. The table had tall candles and was covered in a brilliant white cloth. Behind the man was a tall statue that I later learned was the crucifix. It just seemed magical and sad to me since I didn’t really know what anything was. The man suddenly knelt and then stood up again and held up a golden cup and something else in his hands. Dad whispered into my ear at that point, “Finn, do you see it?”

“What,” I asked, “the man?”

“No,” Dad said. “That man’s the priest. Do you see what he’s holding? That’s God.”

I said yes, but I didn’t really see. I didn’t really understand that Dad meant that the cup and the piece of bread that the priest held was God. But I did feel the magic.

You could say that day was the start of my vocation. Dad put a spiritual fire into me. I felt the magic and wanted more. So when my time came to enter seminary after finishing high school, I went gladly. In 2013 I entered the Jesuit program of formation or spiritual training and began my path towards the religious life.

I say that I’m a Catholic priest at least for the time being because of the scroll in my hands. I’ve devoted my life to connecting with the magic that I felt in that choir loft 26 years ago. Now, although I deeply feel that magic, I wonder if everything I’ve learned about it is misdirected.

As a Jesuit seminarian, I attended Catholic University in Washington, DC and graduated with a double major in Philosophy and Computer Studies. Did I mention that I was born

in 1996 and grew up with the wired generation? I am a proud digital native. That combination of a mind trained for philosophic inquiry with a curiosity trained for digital adventures has been a source of both pride and trouble. As one old priest in charge of discipline among us seminarians at CU said to me, “Finn, you’re an independent thinker and that’s the cause of a lot of problems.”

After university, I was sent to the Gregorian Pontifical University to study. My professors and mentors recognized a certain driven quality in me; so I studied both Biblical languages and church law at the same time. At the age of twenty-five I was awarded a Doctorate in Canon Law or J.C.D. Six months later, I was ordained a priest. At twenty-six I was awarded a Doctorate in Theology for studies in Biblical Languages from the Pontifical Biblical Institute, a member of the Jesuit Gregorian Consortium. To say that I was blessed with a first-class education would be an understatement.

I met the new pope during my time at the Pontifical University while studying Church law. It was July 31<sup>st</sup> four years ago and he was still just the American-born John Henry, Cardinal Archbishop of the Church of St. Paul Outside The Walls. This is one of the four major basilicas of Rome. Several major American prelates had been invited to the celebration, and as a newly ordained priest, I took part in celebrating the Mass with them.

I must have caught the cardinal’s eye. We struck up a conversation and we discovered a shared love for languages and a common background in the American Midwest. Cardinal Henry acted very fondly towards me and I received his affection like a son or nephew. Shortly after receiving my Doctorate in Theology, Cardinal Henry requested that I be assigned to him as an aide. I was honored and excited and a bit intimidated.

Bern Callahan

**To Timothy**  
**801 Ab Urbe Condito<sup>2</sup> -AD 49**

*My Lover, Timothy,*

*All religion is a story.*

*The story of our deep longing to connect with the divine within. Like a force of nature, like a rushing torrent, like a thunderstorm, like a whirlwind, like an earthquake; this deep longing lives in the heart of each man and woman. This longing is good, the essence of the divine within each of us and makes no distinction between male or female, slave or free, Roman, Greek or Jew. This longing is alive.*

As you might guess, I resonate with these lines about the deep longing that lives within each heart. Sitting here, in this monastery garden, I hold this text tenderly and wonder at its beginning, "All religion is a story." I feel caught in my own story and it has taken on a crazy tilt. It would help to go back to the beginning.

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<sup>2</sup> AUC or Ab Urbe Condito counts the years from the founding of the City of Rome. 813 AUC is equivalent to AD 60.



## **October 4, 2026 Vatican City State**

In early October, the old pope died. It was a peaceful and expected death. He'd been gravely ill for over a year. His death, just a few months shy of his ninetieth birthday was not a surprise. Eventually, his old papal heart just stopped beating and he passed away in his sleep.

The Cardinal Camerlengo, along with the Master of Papal Liturgical Ceremonies, the Apostolic Chancellor, the Papal Secretary, and, of course, a doctor, were summoned. Together, they certified that His Holiness was indeed dead. Then, in accordance with the Apostolic Constitution that directs the Catholic Church's government, the Cardinal Vicar for the City of Rome announced His Holiness's death. The Dean of the College of Cardinals informed each cardinal and summoned them to Rome for the election of the next pope. And finally, the dead pontiff's body was prepared and taken to the Basilica of St. Peter to lie in state until the funeral.

All of this is common knowledge and easily available on the Internet. What is less available and uncommon knowledge is the story of the choice for the successor to the old pope.

According to the dictates of church law, a conclave or gathering of cardinal electors meets on the 15<sup>th</sup> day following the death of the pope. Only cardinals under the age of eighty are allowed in as electors. Their being locked into this electoral gathering gives the assembly its name of "conclave." The cardinals are required to elect one candidate with a two-thirds majority vote. If they fail to reach agreement and do not elect a new pope after three days, by law they take a day's rest from voting to pray and meet and discuss with each other.

Since 1958, the election of a new pope has averaged just over seventeen days from the death or resignation of the previous

pontiff.<sup>3</sup> So, it was a shock that the election of our new pontiff required twenty-eight full days. Long conclaves signify deep changes and powerful forces moving within the church. The most recent example of such difficulty choosing a new pope occurred in 1799. Napoleon Bonaparte had invaded Italy and halted short of conquering the Vatican State. The deceased pontiff, Pius VI, was at odds with most of the royalty of Europe. It took months to elect a successor. The conclave of 1799 lasted one hundred and four days, ending on March 14, 1800, with the election of Pius VII.

In this most recent election, three times, the cardinal electors invoked the Special Provision for a day of prayer and contemplation between rounds of voting. It was only on the tenth day of voting, day thirteen of the conclave, and twenty-eight days since the death of the old pope that the electors agreed upon a candidate.

I know the above information because I am trained in church law. As the personal assistant, before his election, to the new pope, I have pieced together some of the following information. Of course, everything is supposed to be secret and all the records of the voting are, by dictate, destroyed. The election represents the will of God and cannot be questioned. But this is 2026, and even cardinals keep electronic records. And those records are open to me, or anyone who knows how to look for them.

One hundred and fifteen cardinal electors entered the conclave that elected the old pope. Of those one hundred and fifteen cardinals, only one remained eligible as an elector for the new pontiff. This elector was my friend and mentor, Cardinal Henry. In 2013, he was among the youngest of those to elect the

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<sup>3</sup> John XXIII - 19 days, 1958  
Paul VI - 18 days, 1963  
John Paul I - 20 days, 1978  
John Paul II - 17 days, 1978  
Benedict XVI - 17 days, 2005  
Francis I - 13 days, 2013

old pope. Now he was the only elector who was still under eighty.<sup>4</sup> One hundred and eleven Cardinals entered the conclave of 2026 as electors. At the conclusion of the thirty-eighth round of ballots, Joseph Cardinal Henry accepted election as the new pope and chose as his name Francis II.

Just over 58% of the cardinal electors of 2026 were European. Twenty-eight were Italian. Another thirty-one were from other European countries. The remaining fifty-two cardinals were almost evenly split between the new churches of the developing world and the established churches of South and North America.

Of course, papal politics is never as clearly delineated as a New World/Old World split. Many of the Europeans, appointed during the old pope's reign, were very liberal minded. They took fully to his message of a simpler church, dedicated to serving the poor. Many of the electors from the developing world were more conservative. Theology to them appears more black and white, good vs. bad, orthodoxy vs. heresy and most of all, Catholicism vs. rival religions and ideologies. These cardinals come from churches struggling with revolution, poverty, terrorism and ongoing war.

And so the voting went on and on and on for thirty-seven rounds. On the first day of the conclave, one round of voting is permitted. It seems clear that during that first round, there were four principal candidates, each representing a major voting bloc. Each received an almost equal number of ballots. The theologically liberal Cardinal Rabigot of Paris received thirty-three votes. The vocally conservative Cardinal Archbishop of Venezuela received thirty votes. Cardinal Salazar of Manila received twenty-five votes. And the Italian Cardinal Vecera, Secretary of State and Camerlengo, received twenty-three votes. No clear compromise appeared.

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<sup>4</sup> Only cardinals under 80 years of age are eligible to serve as electors.

Church law allows for four rounds of voting, twice each morning and afternoon on subsequent days. Two days and eight more rounds of voting left the conclave deadlocked with the four viable candidates still under consideration. None of the candidates withdrew their names. By decree, the fourth day of the conclave was a day of rest and contemplation.

How do I know this? Well, plainly stated, cardinals are not the only ones secured within the conclave. They are princes of the church. And although they live simply for the length of the conclave, they are not completely without servants. In the most recent conclave, eighty extras, including the secretary for the College of Cardinals, priest confessors, cooks, elevator operators and even security personnel, have some access to the cardinals during their period of secrecy and seclusion.<sup>5</sup> Because of my gift with languages, I was among the “extras” as one of the priest confessors. I was able to hear confession in Spanish, Italian, German and English. As an “extra,” I didn’t participate in the events of the election, but I had access to the cardinals and their support staff.

I don’t want you to assume that my knowledge arises from the confessional. In a role like confessor, one becomes aware of things, even when they are not directly spoken of. Perhaps most importantly, I only ask you to judge the probability of what I share. It matches the public accounts of the conclave, and gives a more than reasonable explanation for several events that have followed.

At the beginning of the fifth day, the first day of the second round of voting, there were still three strong candidates for the

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<sup>5</sup> “Ritual and Secrecy Surround Conclave,” Daniel J Wakin, NYT, March 13, 2013. “In an effort to limit the release of such inside information, the extras to the drama are sworn to secrecy, on pain of excommunication. The secretary of the College of Cardinals, priests for cardinal confessions, doctors, nurses, elevator operators, security officers, cleaning and meal crews and minibus drivers who all serve the cardinals — all took the oath on Monday in the Pauline Chapel in the Apostolic Palace. They numbered about 90.”

Papacy, the Cardinals Salazar of Manila and Arango of Caracas and the Cardinal Secretary, Vecera. Over the course of the previous day of reflection and prayer, Cardinal Rabigot of Paris had withdrawn his name from consideration. A wise man, the cardinal knew that he was a polarizing force. The conservatives within the College of Cardinals would never accept him and if elected, he would be sure to reign amid controversy and conflict. I have been told that, as he met with his supporters on the special provisions day, he gave each of them the advice to vote their conscience and their heart, to follow their best understanding of the teachings of Jesus before the laws and customs of the Church. As I now read these long secreted letters from Paul to Timothy, I wonder at the resonance of history. Across the centuries, two devoted spiritual journeyers, telling their followers and their friends to follow their heart.

*To Timothy  
(V Timothy)*

*814 AUC – AD 62*

*From Paul's Fifth Letter to Timothy*

*The day of my final judgment before Caesar is quite near and I am inspired by the divine spark to share this final testament with you.*

*The divine spark within is true. To recognize this spark as truth allows for room to grow and flower and bear fruit. To call the spark real is too small a garden wall.*

*Guard well against those forces that seek to imprison this spark. They mean well and deserve kindness mixed with wisdom. Do your best to help these forces discover the power of the divine within. Avoid engaging in disputes about which prison of ideas and which story better serves the spark; since none serve it well. The spark is best served by a kind and open heart.*

And so, on the fourteenth ballot for the new pope, the traditionalist Cardinal Arango of Caracas received thirty-five votes, Cardinal Salazar thirty-three votes, and the Cardinal Secretary of State received forty-three votes. The voting blocs hardened their lines and there was virtually no change over the next eleven rounds of voting.

The conservatives and traditionalists were vocally afraid of the next pope continuing the policies of the old pope. His emphasis on taking the Gospel to the poor and listening to the voice of the laity had lessened their authority even while it refilled the pews in the Church. The liberal bloc seemed to split between the Cardinals Vecera and Salazar. The Cardinal Secretary represented the bureaucratic safety of the Curia combined with a reputation for occasional open-mindedness. He appeared to be a workable compromise. Salazar was lesser known but promised, at least on the surface, to continue to move forward with the work of the old pope.

During the course of what would prove to be the final day of rest within the conclave of 2026, Cardinal Vecera withdrew his name from consideration as the next pope. Speaking to friends and supporters, the cardinal said that he hoped one less candidate would inspire the College of Cardinals to make a choice pleasing to God. Vecera's withdrawal prompted several of his supporters to look for an alternate to either Cardinal Salazar, who was an unknown, or Cardinal Arango, who was unacceptable to them. They quickly identified a cardinal who seemed like an amicable compromise, Cardinal Henry. Within two ballots enough votes swung from both the former supporters of Vecera and the supporters of Cardinal Salazar to elect the American cardinal as the next pope.

## **October 30, 2026**

### **Private Study of Francis II**

I am quite anxious. In the last three weeks, I witnessed the longest conclave in recent memory and fierce infighting amongst the cardinal electors. Along with the other “extras” who witnessed the conclave, I am sworn to silence. I carry the burden of secrets.

Once admitted to the new pope’s private study, I enter and kneel to kiss his ring. I immediately notice that we are not alone. Another priest is also in the room. I recognize him as Monsignor Arturo Abato. Abato had served, up until the old pope’s death, as his private secretary. His presence in the private study at this interview gave the clear signal that he would likely continue in this role for the new pope, at least for the time being.<sup>6</sup> The role of Papal Secretary is much larger than the role I knew with Cardinal Henry. The Papal Secretary is often charged with conveying the pope’s wishes to the competing forces within the Curia and church hierarchy, and also serves as an occasional unofficial emissary for the pope. In such a role, mature and well-nurtured connections within the hierarchy and bureaucracy would be essential. Although I have many contacts within the bureaucracy and know several cardinals, I just do not have this level of connection and influence. I am sad but not surprised by Monsignor Abato’s presence. Yesterday, I was the private secretary to Cardinal Henry. Today, I don’t know. I don’t know who I will be after this interview.

“Your Holiness,” I say.

“Finn,” says the new pope and I relax a bit. “It’s been a whirlwind, since the conclave. I’m glad you were able to come.”

I wait for him to continue.

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<sup>6</sup> The choice to have the Papal Secretary continue his role from the deceased pope’s service to serving the new pope has recent precedent. In March 2013, Pope Francis I chose Benedict XV’s second private secretary as his first secretary with expanded powers of Vatican finances.

“Everything seems to be changing around me. Two weeks ago,” he sighs and pauses. He appears to consider his next words. “Now I have the whole Papal Household, the camerlengo, the nuns and doctors and”—he looks at me quizzically—“a private secretary.”

“Finn,” he continues, “we’ll have to find a new post for you. You’re young and bright. Your future is open. Where do you wish to serve next? A teaching post at the Gregorian College? A role within the Curia? Pastoral work?”

I’m overwhelmed by his questions. The electors thrust his new role as pope upon him. I feel groundless and don’t have any clear idea of where I should serve next.

“Your Holiness,” I answer, “I think it would be most helpful if I could have some time to pray and reflect where to serve. Would you consider allowing me a month’s time for retreat and contemplation?”

“Of course, Finn,” he answers. “Where would you like to go for this retreat?”

I answer with the first thing that pops into my mind. “Jerusalem, Your Holiness.”

“Fine, fine, excellent choice for a scholar like you,” he says. “I’ll ask Monsignor Abato to make arrangements and send them to you at once.” Then he raises his right hand, blesses me and signals the end of the interview.

“Thank you Your Holiness for your kindness,” I say. Then I kiss his ring once more and leave the papal study.



**7:00 a.m.: October 31, 2026**  
**All Hallow's Eve**  
**Benedictine Abbey Attached to Basilica of St. Paul**  
**Outside the Walls**

It's 7:00 a.m. and I've just finished offering daily Mass. This is perhaps the most comforting ritual in my life. I've attended Mass daily, or offered Mass since September of 2011, when I began my studies for the priesthood. Each day the Mass is the same. Each day it is different. And today is like the previous five thousand four hundred and seventy-five days, the sacred ritual, retelling the story of Jesus' final meal and death, restating the promise of his resurrection.

I've lived and worked at the Basilica for the past three years. It was the most natural and also the easiest place to live and be while I served Cardinal Henry in his role as Archpriest of the Basilica.

History indicates that the Emperor Constantine originally built St. Paul's Outside the Walls sometime before the year AD 330. Legend has it that Paul's body was buried two miles outside the walls of Ancient Rome, along the Ostian Way, the road that linked Rome with the seaport at Ostia. The saint's body was placed in a tomb owned by one of Paul's disciples, a Roman woman name Lucina. Soon after internment, an unusual memorial for a saint marked the spot of the martyr's burial. A tropaeum, usually the sign of respect for a slain warrior, was erected on the spot in memory of Paul and became the object of veneration. In the fourth century, Paul's head was interred at the Lateran Basilica and his headless corpse was interred at St. Paul's Outside the Walls. Twenty centuries later, head and body lie separated just as they did on the day of his death in AD 62.

Tradition has it that Paul's body is buried beneath the altar resting beneath a marker that reads, "Paul, Apostle and Martyr." A circular hole connects the marker to the tomb. This hole

accords with an ancient Roman practice of providing the bones of the dead with libations.

The Basilica, dating to the time of the first Christian Roman emperors, has seen major additions, fires and renovations. In 2006 a Vatican archaeological team uncovered a white marble sarcophagus buried beneath the altar of the Basilica. A hole to view the sides of the sarcophagus was opened but the remains were left undisturbed within. Related archaeological materials from the excavation were then stored in the new buildings erected just outside the ancient church.

And so my mind is quiet when I reenter my room within the Benedictine monastery attached to the Basilica. My room is very simple, indeed a monastic cell. A bed, desk and chair, a simple book case and a small closet. I am surprised to find on my desk a white envelope with my name printed on it. I pick up the envelope: Reverend Finn McDonagh. I open it and find a card, embossed with the new pope's coat of arms and with the following:

*Itinerary: Reverend Finn McDonagh October 31, 2026*

*El Al Airlines # 383: Leonardo da Vinci – Tel Aviv*

*SEAT 12 A*

*Depart Leonardo da Vinci 5:55 p.m.*

*Arrive Tel Aviv 8:40 p.m.*

*To be met at airport by representative from*

*Abu Gosh Monastery, Jerusalem.*

*Return itinerary details TBD.*

Signed with the simple message: "Enjoy this time of retreat."

Francis II

## **8:15 a.m.: New Buildings Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls Rome, Italy**

I wander the gardens and buildings of the Basilica for the next thirty minutes. I am leaving my home of the past three years and have very little time to collect my thoughts or say goodbye. Jerusalem is far away. My work here, with the former cardinal, is finished. I find myself at the entry to the new buildings, constructed after the 2006 uncovering of Paul's tomb. Entering, I see the exhibits that detail the excavation and findings. The display of the ancient fresco that shows Paul with a high forehead and pointed beard is familiar, and I hardly notice the display about the findings of bone and limestone.<sup>7</sup> My steps lead me towards the library. A large, illuminated antique Bible is open on the freestanding lectern. The Bible is one of the treasures of the Basilica museum. Hand-painted letters form the Latin script, and the pages are rich with brilliantly illumined capital letters and elaborate illustrations. The book stands open to Paul's second letter to Timothy. Latin is no problem for me. I've been studying the language for over ten years and read it almost as fluently as I read English. Rereading the letter my eyes are drawn to the concluding phrases, surrounded by a somewhat unusual painting of a sword standing among small and large flames. I read: "Gratia vobiscum. Quaere in tertia. Amen." I am more than a little surprised. "Grace be with you. Look for a third. Amen." I don't know what the words mean. The text appears genuine and unaltered. There are no visible marks of the page having been changed or painted over, of letters being re-calligraphed. "Look for the third." I cross the library to find a modern version of the Bible in Latin and open to the ending of the same letter to Timothy. This version ends in the more customary fashion,

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2009/10/08/new-discoveries-relating-to-the-apostle-paul.aspx>

“Gratia vobiscum. Amen.” No mention of a third. I find an English version of the same letter in another Bible: “Grace be with you. Amen.”

I look back to the sentences immediately before the strange ending and find in each Bible the same: “Be diligent to come before winter. Eubulus salutes you, as do Prudens, Linus, Claudia and all the brothers. The Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

A plaque besides the lectern notes that this Bible is a handwritten copy that closely corresponds to the Codex Sinaiticus. The Codex dates from the fourth century and contains the oldest complete copy of the Christian New Testament. It also contains two chapters not included in modern Bibles, the Letter of the Apostle Barnabas and a text simply called the Shepherd.<sup>9</sup> The Codex was rediscovered in 1844 at the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, Egypt. My retreat will take place within driving distance of this ancient site.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy: <http://ebible.org/web/2Tim.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Codex Sinaiticus: <http://codexsinaiticus.org/en/codex/content.aspx> In the Codex version of II Timothy, there are faint annotations in the text and some small marginal markings near the final verse.  
<http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/manuscript.aspx?book=48&chapter=4&lid=en&side=r&verse=22&zoomSlider=0#>

<sup>10</sup> The Monastery of St. Catherine is located in Qesm Sharm Ash Sheikh, South Sinai, Egypt – 512 kilometers from Abu Gosh, Israel.

**Noon**  
**Benedictine Abbey, St. Paul's Outside the Walls**  
**Rome, Italy**

It's a simple task to pack my things for the flight to Jerusalem and for this retreat.

A passport, a small amount of cash, two changes of black clothes, one pair of jeans and some casual shirts just in case, my Nikes and some light workout clothes. I almost always travel with two books. This time I include a well-worn copy of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius and a book on spiritual philosophy that I've just begun. *Meditations*, by the emperor Marcus Aurelius, caught my attention as I browsed the selection of used English-language books at the Open Door Book Store on Via Lungaretta. Since picking this book up, I've been contemplating these words: "Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth."

I get ready to leave for the airport with my small collection of things. I have a deep sense of loneliness and my mind keeps turning the events of the recent papal election over and over again. I've spent the past fifteen years on my own spiritual journey and at this moment feel deep sadness. Have I just been reassuring myself that I exist, that I'm OK? Why am I leaving this city, which I've grown to love? What work will I have, now that my position as personal secretary to the cardinal has vanished into the white smoke that signaled the election of the new pope? I felt important in my role; felt as if I were near the center of things, felt like I had an impact on things. Now I'm adrift. These are my thoughts as I depart for the airport.

I realize, as I leave St. Paul's that I have no close friends to say goodbye to. My work required constant availability to the cardinal and left little time for friendship. I've lost touch with my classmates from the Gregorian College and my friends back in Wisconsin are a distant memory. I am thirty years old as I stand in an educated and cultured solitude, wondering.

A white Roman taxi arrives in front of the Basilica to pick me up. I smile at the SPQR logo on the taxi door. SPQR<sup>11</sup>: The Senate and People of Rome, the ancient Roman equivalent of USA is the logo that was emblazoned under the Imperial Eagle and preceded legions in their conquest. Now it is the taxi logo that guarantees you have a fair chance at not being ripped off with a dishonest fare. Until 2011, when you phoned for a taxi from your hotel or home, the taxis would begin charging when they left the taxi stand. Surprised travelers found that before their trip even began, they owed lira to the driver. With the unpredictability of Roman traffic and the many possible routes from the taxi stand to you, the amount already owing could be low or high. Since the 2011 taxi reforms, when your ride arrives it shows a set fare of 3.5 Euros. Everyone gets charged the same. That's just how things are done in Rome. It strikes me as curious, just a few moments ago I was absorbed in my sense of sadness and loneliness. Now, I'm on guard to not be ripped off by the taxi driver. The fare shows 3.5 Euros as I get in. I relax a bit and smile at the back-and-forth quality of my preoccupations.

"Dove, padre?" Where to, asks the driver.

"Fiumicino," I answer, using the Roman name for the Leonardo da Vinci airport.

I'm a priest traveling from Rome to Jerusalem so I'm wearing my clergy clothes. I only have one small suitcase with me, a carry-on bag, and I contemplate changing into my more casual clothes. But this is Rome, and priests in clergy clothes are everywhere. And wearing my clerical clothing will help the greeter recognize me at Ben Gurion airport. It all seems easier, dressed this way. I have a role. My interactions are scripted and predictable. I settle in for the taxi ride to the airport.

Rome is an amazing city. No longer the center of a military empire, it is still the center of an empire of thought and spirit and indeed fashion The Fiumicino is one of the unexpected gems of

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<sup>11</sup> SPQR; Senatus Populus Que Romanorum: The Senate and People of Rome

this empire. I pay the driver, exit the cab and enter Terminal 5, stepping into a tableau of colliding cultures. Since 1988, Terminal 5 has been the departure point for flights to Israel and the United States. Nuns and priests in religious garb, coming and going from one of Christendom's sacred cities, men in Armani and Versace suits, and businesswomen wearing Ferragamo and Prada. Italian style is everywhere. Power, sensuality, self-confidence are all on display.

**5:15 p.m. October 31, 2026**  
**Leonardo da Vinci Airport**  
**Rome, Italy**

It's boarding call and my seat is 12A: First Class on this Boeing 737 flight from Rome to Tel Aviv. I smile at the graciousness of the arrangement. After all, it would have been completely acceptable to travel economy. I'm slightly self-conscious as I enter the line-up for first-class boarding. Just ahead of me is a very handsome, youngish man. We make eye contact and say hello.

"Traveling to Israel for the first time?" he asks me and smiles.

"No," I answer and smile back. "Several years ago, I studied languages for six months at Hebrew University and the Pontifical Institute in Jerusalem<sup>12</sup>. I love Jerusalem."

"David," he continues and holds out his hand in greeting.

"Finn," I say and shake his hand.

"Not a very good Jewish name," he smiles back. Perhaps we can find you a more proper name for your time in Israel. What seat are you in?"

"12A," I answer.

"I love coincidences," he replies. Holding up his boarding pass he adds, "12B."

"Where are you headed on this trip?" he asks.

"Abu Gosh." I answer

"Abu Gosh," David answers and seems to consider for a bit. "Well, while you're there, you must try the food at the Naji Restaurant. It's the best in the area. Of course, the cuisine is Mediterranean. If you want Israeli food, then it's the Abu-Gosh restaurant."

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.biblico.it/jerusalem.html> The Institute in Jerusalem is not an independent institution in its own right, with its own proper academic program. Rather it is a house at the service of the professors and students of the school in Rome as a base of operations for their studies elsewhere in the Holy Land. There is, though, a library and a museum.



“I don’t think I’ll be eating out much during my stay. I’m headed into a retreat at the Abbey Abu-Gosh.” I found myself becoming a bit uncomfortable with the unexpected warmth of our conversation. David exudes friendliness and charm. I hope that the story of my retreat would help shift the conversation to something more spiritual or at least end the talk of where to eat.

“That’s marvelous,” he continues. “I love Abu Gosh. It’s only a short drive from my home in Bat Yam and the restaurant is only a few minutes walk from the Abbey. You head north from the Abbey on Mahmud Rashid Street and take the first right turn from the roundabout. Continue past the tomb of Shaykh Isa al Aqura. Take your second right onto Kvish ha Shalom Street and the restaurant is just ahead on the right.”

He paused. I said nothing.

“The restaurant takes late-night reservations. I could make a reservation for November 3<sup>rd</sup>, three nights from now, say 10 p.m. I hope you’ll be able to join me there. No one should return home from Israel having only savored Abbey fare.”

We went ahead and boarded. During the flight from Rome to Tel Aviv we became friends. Dinner is now a plan. David shares that he is returning from a medical conference in Rome. He is a pediatric-cardiology specialist at the Wolfson Medical Center in Tel Aviv and had attended sessions on something called Model-Driven Prediction and Simulation in Pediatric Cardiology. It is very clear that he is passionate about his work and driven to excellence. He glows as he speaks of new advances and saving more children’s lives. “Most important,” he said, “is that children can now recover to live life with a full heart. No more need for a half-life, lived in the shadow of sickness.”

During the flight, I share what I can of my recent life: that I had been the personal secretary to the new pope, that I attended the conclave as part of the support staff, and that I was going to Abu Gosh to discern the next steps, the new direction for my life. I talk about growing up in the American midwest. He shares

stories of a childhood lived in Jerusalem and young-adult years in Tel Aviv.

Three hours after take-off, we land. With only my carry-on luggage, I say goodbye as we leave the plane. David hands me his card, David Cohen, M.D. with the usual phone number and contact information on the front and with "10 p.m. November 3: Restaurant Abu Gosh" written on the back. "See you there," he says and walks away with a wave.

**9:15 p.m., October 31, 2026**  
**Arrivals Hall**  
**Ben Gurion Airport: Tel Aviv, Israel**

I recognize my driver holding a sign with my name: Father Finn. I'm reminded of David's comment that I could find an Israeli name while in Israel and smile. The driver recognizes my clerical clothes as I walk towards her. I'm suddenly aware of the change of style and intensity from da Vinci to Ben Gurion. It's all a matter of perception, but here I feel less style and power, more risk-taking with a spirit of adventure plus warmth. My driver is pure chauffeur: black pantsuit, black chauffeur's cap, and white sign with black block lettering.

I walk over to where she stands with her sign and say, "I'm Finn. Are you here to take me to Abu Gosh?"

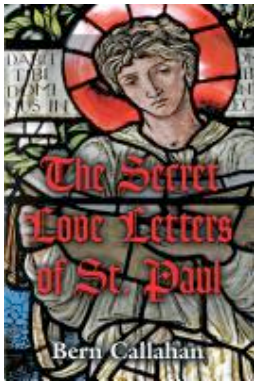
"Welcome to Israel," she answers. "Do you have any additional luggage?"

"No," I answer.

"Then," taking the handle of my roll-on bag into her control, "follow me, please," she says and begins to walk briskly away.

I have two choices. Lose my limited possessions or follow her. I follow and find myself quickly at the limousine.

My driver, still no name offered, opens a rear door for me. I step in. My one bag is placed in the trunk and then we drive away. No conversation. Luxurious solitude and air-conditioned comfort moving through the mid-70-degree evening. I begin to wonder what the monastery will be like. The ride takes thirty silent minutes.



*The Secret Love Letters of Saint Paul* interweaves two stories. Soon after the death of Jesus, the Apostle Paul profoundly changes Christianity to include pagans as well as Jews. Paul's story is a tale of radical change and passion told from the point of view of Timothy, his lover. In 2026, Finn McDonagh's story begins with his rediscovery of secret letters from Paul to Timothy. The Letters take him into intrigue, secrecy, and maneuverings within the the Vatican.

# The Secret Love Letters of Saint Paul

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