

Habemus Papam: The Middle Path as redemption in *The Conclave*

Dr. Sonya J. Nair* 

Associate Professor, Department of English
All Saints' College
University of Kerala
Thiruvananthapuram
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Abstract

*Cinema has the potential to bring narratives to life and to ensure their longevity in public memory. If art was the visual medium of memory making in the pre-cinematic days, the voluble, animated, audible medium of cinema has captured the imagination of human beings world-wide. The soft power that cinema exudes has ensured that it wields social-political-economic agency and carries the responsibility of disseminating a certain point of view. The magic of cinema is such that it can be used to tell a story from any angle and with the right techniques of narration, music, characterization, the viewers also become partisan to the stated views. The paper seeks to discuss the film *The Conclave* in the light of the gendered notion of religion. Released in 2024, *The Conclave* presents the intricacies of the Vatican as they set out to elect a new pope. The Cardinals present a cross-section of the world as we know it today, hypermasculine, conservatives jostling for space alongside vacillating moderates and 'woke' individuals who look for diversity and inclusivity. As war and violence rages all over the world, what sort of a voice is needed to head one of the most powerful and influential institutions in the world? *The Conclave* presents a resolution that is bold and visionary- it brings forth the idea of an individual who encompasses a deep understanding of humanity from living in the most troubled areas in the world but also from a lived reality. *The Conclave* presents a perspective that is revolutionary, healing and androgynous- much like Christ.*

Keywords: *The Conclave*, Pope, Vatican, Intersex, Woke politics, Critical Gender and Race studies

The paper examines the film *The Conclave* closely and looks into elements that align with the current policy of the church as led by Pope Francis. It examines policy documents to understand the influences that shape perceptions surrounding Intersex people, including their depiction in media.

* Author: Dr. Sonya J. Nair

Email: sonya.eng@allsaintscollege.ac.in

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5961-8735>

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The Pope is the spiritual leader of more than 1.3 billion followers around the world and they regard him as the vicar of Christ. He is also the leader of the Vatican- which has an independent government. According to Eugene V. Rostow in the article *the Role of The Vatican in the Modern World*,

It has unrivaled sources of information through church universities, schools, monasteries, convents, and other institutions. It deals directly with the most fundamental elements in the life of many communities: the protection of the clergy in their mission, and the faithful in their education and worship involve the Church in highly practical diplomatic matters throughout the world. The Vatican maintains formal relations with over 50 nations....

(<https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/role-of-the-vatican-in-the-modern-world-4155>)

This means that the potential of the Vatican to influence policy, create knowledge, raise consciousness, harness soft-power and create dialogues is immense. It is in every sense of the term, a government and one of the most diverse countries in terms of the nationalities of the followers. In the medieval times, the powerful houses of Italy vied with each other to install one of their scions on the papal seat and thus influence the course of history and also create immense wealth for the familial beneficiaries. The Vatican has mounted campaigns, waged wars and engaged in serious lobbying in order to turn the course of history to suit its needs. However, in the twentieth century, a reformist zeal led to the Vatican reaching out to more people, recognizing the intrinsic value and contribution of its non-Caucasian followers and re-positioning itself as the spiritual centre of Christendom and as an active advocate for peace. There were various initiatives towards bringing a sceptic flock back in. The last century also saw Pope Benedict stepping down and making way for Pope Francis. While ill-health was cited as the reason for this, unconfirmed sources spoke in the media about the sense of rigidity and conservatism pervading the Vatican on account of the orthodox beliefs the former Pope harboured. The transition of power is pictured in the film *The Two Popes*. (2019)

The Church, especially the Vatican, holds a special fascination for film-makers. The rituals, the chanting, the prayers in Latin, the grandeur of the spectacle of the priests and the nuns dressed

somberly and the sermon that is delivered, all make for some excellent shots. The gloomy interiors of some of the older churches invite stories of ghosts and mysterious hallways- like in the *Da Vinci Code* (2006).

Other films such as *Doubt* (2008) about the church in general and the lives of clergy are also rather interesting as they provide an insight into the ways that religious institutions that are struggling to keep their followers, deal with existential crises. There are also horror films such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *Annabelle* (2014), *The Pope's Exorcist* (2023) where the Vatican is a distant presence but which has a controlling grip over its parishes and the flock. The Vatican here is seen as a conduit to God and its rituals are perceived as what keeps evil at bay.

Today the Catholic church is led by a figure who is quite polarizing. Pope Francis is now known for his liberal views on homosexuality, on sex and on the rights of the gender and sexuality divergent. This has won many young people over to the church while also alienating the more traditional of the believers. During his recent trip to Sudan, the Pope denounced laws against homosexuality and remarked that "are children of God and God loves them."

(<https://www.npr.org/2023/03/13/1162954465/after-10-years-as-pope-francis-continues-to-reshape-the-catholic-church>)

The same website carries a statement by the Pope delivered in Bolivia in 2015 where he protested against the harm being done to the environment.

Once capital becomes an idol and guides people's decisions, once greed for money presides over the entire socio-economic system, it ruins society, it sets people against one another, it even puts at risk our common home, our sister mother Earth.

He protested against the wall that America was building in Mexico and has tried to decentralize the Vatican. These progressive moves do not hide his rather ambivalent stand on child abuse and the corruption going on in the financial dealings of the churches. Yet, there is a strong sense of positivity regarding the Church and the ways that it has welcomed diversity and inclusivity measures, especially through ordaining cardinals from Africa and Asia. The vernacularisation of the litany, the adoption of indigenous colours in the vestments of the cardinals- all have created the image of the Church now as an open, democratic space that aspires to modernity and inclusivity.

It is this emerging image of the Vatican that the 2024 film *The Conclave* directed by Edward Berger relies on for credibility as it narrates one of the most secretive, most complicated processes of election in the free world- the election of a new Pope. At the death of the Pope, Cardinal Lawrence is charged with holding the Conclave to elect a new Pope. There are already frontrunners to the position starting with Tremblay and Tedesco. These cardinals are quite the opposite to each other. While Tremblay is quite liberal, Tedesco represents the more orthodox elements of the Church. He is against Gay marriages and wants the litany to go back to being in Latin. Lawrence roots for Bellini, yet another candidate to become the Pope. Just before the conclave settles down to vote, one more cardinal makes an appearance- Benitez was the Archbishop of Kabul and had been ordained *in pectore* meaning in secret or in private. The now-deceased Pope had ordained Benitez in secret and this is why there had been no mention of him. There is a calmness about the new cardinal. He does not seem intimidated by the pomp and ritual of the Vatican and he settles down immediately. Lawrence understands that Benitez had been serving in some of the most conflict- ridden areas of the world and had been quietly serving humanity and God. he understands that the Pope trusted Benitez and saw something special in him

The voting throws up more front runners including Bellini whom Lawrence roots for and Adeyemi- an African Cardinal, who if elected, would become the first Pope from Africa. The inclusive result leads to yet another round of voting where Lawrence finds that someone has voted for him as well. this greatly surprises him as he had clearly stated that he did not want the position. Meanwhile Adeyemi's rising popularity does not go down well with Tremblay and Tedesco and soon a young African nun walks up to him and enters into an argument with him. Lawrence investigates and finds that some years ago, Adeyemi had had an affair with the nun who was then a mere girl and has a child by her who was then given for adoption. While Adeyemi requests that all this be not revealed, Lawrence has no choice but to ensure that Adeyemi's campaign ends there.

Bellini who is the voice of liberalism in the Church wonders if Lawrence is really on his side and if the votes that Lawrence got were n making him ambitious. Lawrence meanwhile finds out that Tremblay had brought the nun in specially here to irritate Adeyemi and that the Pope before passing away had caught some of the corrupt practices of Tremblay. This ends Tremblay's campaign as well leaving Bellini and Lawrence in the fray.

Tedesco had already made his belligerent views clear on the liberal practices of the church and how he intends to shut them down, all of which fills Lawrence with disappointment. Bellini is advised by his supporters not to be very vocal about women's rights, divorce or homosexuality. He is advised to be a moderate so as to appeal to all sections of the electoral collegium. However, the conclave in Rome is concurrent with mass protests over various issues in Italy and the protests spread to Rome as well and one day there is a severe explosion quite near where the Cardinals stay to vote. This causes them to be moved to a secure location where a debate breaks out between Tedesco and Bellini. Tedesco roars about how Islamist hardliners have made life difficult and that the soft approach of the church has been its undoing.

The firm voice of Benitez interjects and he gives a strong message on the importance of conflict resolution. He asks that the hardline positions everywhere in the world be dropped as violence only begets more violence. The cycle never ends. The next round of voting sees Benitez as the front runner and the final winner. He is elected Pope and takes on the name Innocent.

There is celebration in Rome at the forthcoming ordination. However, Lawrence is given more information by his investigators regarding Benitez and when he goes to seek clarification from Benitez, he is told by the priests waiting to dress Benitez that he would not undress before them. Lawrence rushes into the room and on finding themselves completely alone, asks him for the truth of his story. Benitez admits without any guile that he had indeed been financed by the Pope to go to a clinic in Switzerland but it was not to seek treatment, rather to provide a solution to Benitez's situation. During an appendectomy during his time as a Cardinal, Benitez is informed by doctors that he is actually a hermaphrodite or an intersex individual- he carried the sexual organs of both sexes. The Pope sent him to Switzerland for corrective surgery that was purely elective. But Benitez considered the matter very seriously and then decided not to go ahead with the surgery. He tells Lawrence that he is as God made him. Innocent then goes forth to receive the acclaim of the people.

While there is a proliferation of films on erotic minorities, there are quite few films on intersex people. Often the term intersex is confused with terms such as *Hijras* and Transgenders. Intersex individuals are born with the sexual characteristics of both sexes and are often subjected to corrective surgeries, especially during infancy. In recent times, more and more governments have banned this practice and the child is allowed to decide if any surgery is needed at all.

Films such as *Everybody* (2023) discusses this very issue and the possible aftermath. *No Box for Me* (2018) and *Who I Am Not* (2023) are documentaries that examine intersex connectivities in colonized nations. These films place an emphasis on the way that Intersex individuals have to deal with biases and misconceptions about them. In India, there have been films on Intersex people, but like Maharani in *Sadak* (1991), many portrayals could turn out to be rather negative. There are very few sensitive portrayals such as in *Darmiyaan* (1997), *Shabnam Mausi* (2005), *Tamanna* (1998), *Eka* (2018) which look at the very core of these individuals and examine the nuances of their lives.

Intersex people are defined by the United Nations as “born with sex characteristics that do not fit typical definitions for male or female bodies, including sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, hormonal patterns, and/or chromosome patterns. [...] According to experts, between 0.05 per cent and 1.7 per cent of the population is born with intersex traits.” (UNOHCHR, 2019: 2)

In India, they are often blanketed under the terms Hijra and Kinnars. As per the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 as well, the intersex people are subcategorized under transgender. This shows the lack of awareness or indeed the willingness to learn about the spaces occupied by intersex people in the social spectrum.

What *The Conclave* tries to portray is that in a world that is growing increasingly growing rigid and binary- where violence begets more violence, the middle path is the true and actual solution. The intersex body is a perfect metaphor for what the world needs-the acceptance of its diversities, and moreover, respecting these diversities rather than seeking to conform. This idea is something that has been variously spoken by all those who have actually worked for peace and reconciliation in the world- from Buddha to Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr to Bishop Desmond Tutu to the Dalai Lama- the age of intolerance is the age of the Binary. Rather, we must look for the age of diversity and inclusivity and thus learn to make space for everyone- this is the message Benitez or Pope Innocent also gives through his work and indeed through the acceptance of his body.

The Conclave places hope for a more peaceful world through acceptance- of oneself and of others. The liminality of the Pope -and of the Church by extension- paves the way for the possibility of a new world order of understanding and cooperation.

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