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THE FISHERMAN'S RING ITS SOCIAL HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY MEANING

The representation from which the ring takes its name illustrates the miraculous catch of fish, pointing to the words of Jesus spoken to Saint Peter: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men" (Lk 5:10). As early as in the second century, Saint Clement of Alexandria recommended that the Fisherman motif be one of the Eucharistic symbols carved on the gems of Christian rings. Popes use the Ring of the Fisherman to perpetuate the tradition which holds that they are the successors of the Fisherman of Galilee.

The Pope has three different rings: the Fisherman's Ring (*annulus piscatoris*), which belongs only to the Bishop of Rome, and, like all other bishops, the pontifical ring and the ordinary ring.¹ Papal rings, like all rings worn by church dignitaries, belong to the category of the insignia of ecclesiastical authority. As such, they are a multidimensional phenomenon of various orders: artistic, church-legal, historical-social, and (above all) symbolic-religious. They have always been part of the sacred and visual (artistic) culture, they function in it, co-create it, influence it, and at the same time are subject to its influence. This also applies to the Fisherman's Ring, or seal, as a work of art and one of the papal insignia, but, above all, an object with an important cultural role. It is significant in the social sense and can be considered in a broader perspective: within the framework of the social functioning of an object. The inverse relationship (the influence of culture on an object) is revealed through the changes in the materials of which the object is made, in its forms and in the iconographic themes and styles it displays, as well as through the way in which the object is used. It is worth noting that the insignia used by the Pontiff when he exercises his power and symbolizing his power fulfills its function through individual artifacts: works shaped by ancient and contemporary artistic culture. Following these assumptions, the aim of the article is to show the historical, social and liturgical conditions of the ancient and contemporary significance of the Fisherman's Ring and its social functioning. The pontificates of John Paul II and his two successors, Benedict XVI and Francis, provide abundant material

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¹ See *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, vol. 1, s.v. "Anello" (by Enrico Dante) (Florence and Città del Vaticano: Sansoni, 1948), vol. 1, 1217–19.

for relevant reflections, based on the analysis of literature, papal iconography, and media messages.

THE TRADITION OF THE FORM AND USE OF THE FISHERMAN'S RING

The Fisherman's Ring occupies a special place among the three aforementioned types of papal rings. It is usually defined as a signet ring, made entirely of gold, with the (Latin) name of the current pope engraved on the front and a bas-relief image of Saint Peter fishing,² depicted in a boat, casting his nets³. This representation, from which the ring takes its name, illustrates the miraculous catch of fish, pointing to the words of Jesus spoken to Saint Peter: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men" (Lk 5:10). As early as in the second century, Saint Clement of Alexandria recommended that the Fisherman motif be one of the Eucharistic symbols carved on the gems of Christian rings.⁴ Popes use the Ring of the Fisherman to perpetuate the tradition which holds that they are the successors of the Fisherman of Galilee. The Ring was also purportedly used by Saint Peter, but this view, expressed by Bon[a]gratia of Bergamo (c. 1265–1340)⁵ and considered probable by Archbishop Antoni Julian Nowowiejski⁶, has been rejected by others, for instance by Johann-Michael Heineccius⁷ and, after him, by Edmund Waterton.⁸

Three types of images of Saint Peter fishing are known on the Fisherman's seal: with a fishing rod in hand (an example from Rome, dating from 1279), casting a net (a ring from Avignon, dating from 1424) or leaning over the side

² See *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 9, s.v. "Fischerring" (by Claude Lapaire and Wolfgang Augustyn), ed. Wolfgang Augustyn (München: C. H. Beck, 1990), cols. 278–284. Alternatively, see RDKLabor, "Fischerring," parts 1–5, <https://www.rdklabor.de/wiki/Fischerring>.

³ See Edmund Waterton, "On the Annulus Piscatoris, or Ring of the Fisherman," *Archaeologia* 40, no. 1 (1866): 138; *Encyklopedia kościelna podług teologicznej encyklopedji Wetзера i Weltego*, vol. 19, s.v. "Pierścień Rybaka" (by Antoni Julian Nowowiejski) (Warszawa: W drukarni Franciszka Czerwińskiego, 1893), 244; *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, vol. 1, s.v. "Anello del pescatore" (by Giulio Battelli) (Roma: Istituto Giovanni Treccani, 1929), 1219–20.

⁴ See Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor [Paedagogus]*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Highland, New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 285–86. See Antoni Julian Nowowiejski, "Pierścień," in Antoni Julian Nowowiejski, *Wykład liturgii Kościoła katolickiego*, vol. 2, part 1, *O środkach rozwinięcia kultu* (Warszawa: W Drukarni Franciszka Czerwińskiego, 1902), 402.

⁵ See Johann Michael Heineccius, *De Veteribus Germanorum aliarumque Nationum Sigillis, eorumque Vsv et Praestantia, Syntagma Historicum*, (Frankfurt and Leipzig: Sumtibus N. Foersteri, 1709), 28.

⁶ See Nowowiejski, "Pierścień," 410.

⁷ See Heineccius, *De Veteribus Germanorum aliarumque Nationum Sigillis*, 28.

⁸ See Waterton, "On the Annulus Piscatoris, or Ring of the Fisherman": 138.

of a boat while pulling in the net (introduced under Nicholas V, 1447–1455).⁹ The earliest example of an impression of the Fisherman's Ring is the oval seal of Pope Nicholas III (1277–1280) in red sealing wax, attached to a reliquary in the Lateran's Sancta Sanctorum, now in the Vatican Museums. The seal depicts a beardless young man standing, holding a fishing rod with a fish on the end of the line, bearing the inscription: “† SECRETUM NICOLAI PP. III.”¹⁰

According to Giulio Battelli, until the pontificate of Nicholas V (1447–1455), the private seal (*sigillo segreto*) of the papacy did not always depict the figure of a fisherman. For example, the gold ring of the antipope—Clement VII (1378–1394)—also kept at the Vatican, shows his coat of arms surmounted by a tiara and keys, whereas the seal of Pope Eugenius IV (1431–1447) used in some documents depicts the heads of Peter and Paul—the Princes of the Apostles (*anulus capitum Principum Apostolorum*). On the other hand, in the breves¹¹ of Boniface IX (1389–1404), the Fisherman's Ring is called the ring of a sailing boat (*anulus fluctuantis naviculae*). It was not until the time of Nicholas V that the oval seal design (impressed in red sealing wax), with the figure of Saint Peter in a boat, leaning over an outstretched net, and with the pope's name written above, “in the sky,” followed by an ordinal number, became established.

The Fisherman's Ring is a special type of signet ring. It is assumed that from the very outset it was used for signing letters, thus serving the function of a personal ring (*anulus signatoris*) used by the Romans to authenticate their letters. This ancient custom is exemplified, for instance, by the signet ring of the first Roman emperor Octavian Augustus bearing his own likeness. The Fisherman's ring is first mentioned in a letter dating from 1265, from Clement IV to his nephew Peter Grossi of Saint Gilles (published by Augustus Potthast): “Saluta Matrem et Fratres; non scribimus tibi neque familiaribus nostris sub Bulla, sed sub Piscatoris Sigillo quo Romani Pontifices in suis secretis utuntur” (italics mine).¹² Because the Pope compared the “Seal of the Fisherman, which the Bishops of Rome use in their secret affairs” with the “Bull,” i.e., the lead seal attached to an official document,¹³ Edmund Waterton deduced that the

⁹ See *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 9, s.v. “Fischerring,” part 2.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, vol. 1, s.v. “Anello del pescatore,” 1219.

¹¹ The term *breve* refers to a papal letter that is less solemn than a bull and deals with matters of less importance.

¹² Quoted in *Regesta Pontificum Romanorum inde ab a. post Christum natum MCXCVIII ad a. MCCCIV*, ed. August Potthast, vol. 2, no. 19051 (Berlin: Rudolf de Decker, 1875), 1544 and in *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 9, s.v. “Fischerring,” part 4. See also *Enciclopedia Italiana di scienze, lettere ed arti*, vol. 1, s.v. “Anello del pescatore.” 1219.

¹³ The term “Bull” comes from the Latin word *bullā* meaning the lead seal, traditionally affixed to official papal letters or documents. Since the 12th century it came to indicate the entire document. See *Britannica*, s.v. “papal bull,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/bull-papal>.

Popes for some time had been using the Fisherman's ring to seal private letters. As early as the second half of the thirteenth century, its use corresponded to personal seals and secret seals, distinguished from official seals.¹⁴ Beginning with the reign of Boniface IX (1389–1404) it was used to seal all personal letters, including those concerning political and administrative matters. From the reign of Callixtus III (1455–1458) it was used only for official documents,¹⁵ and after his pontificate it was always attached to a breve.¹⁶ Waterton thought it very likely that the Fisherman's Ring was made entirely of gold until the revival of the art of engraving gems which occurred during the Renaissance era. In support of this argument, he presented an impression of the ring on a breve of Clement VIII (1592–1605) in his possession as being made from a jewel rather than metal.¹⁷ The practice of sealing-breves with the Fisherman's Ring, which had lasted since the fifteenth century, ceased in 1842, when the seal impressed in sealing wax was replaced by a circular stamp impressed with the use of red ink, on which the representation from the Fisherman's Ring was retained.¹⁸

THE RING OF THE FISHERMAN AND THE INAUGURATION OF THE PONTIFICATE

The origin of each Fisherman's Ring is closely linked to the institution of the conclave, because it is made before the conclave, with a space left for the pope's name.¹⁹ The *Caeremoniale Romanum* of Gregory X, dating from around 1274, as well as the *Ordinarium Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae* of Cardinal Gaetano Stefaneschi (c. 1270–1343), ordered that the Ring of the Fisherman be presented at the conclave.²⁰ Immediately after the choice is made by the cardinals and announced by the senior cardinal deacon, the new pope announces to the cardinals the name he has taken, after which he proceeds to the sacristy with two cardinal deacons who help him don the papal robes. On his return to the chapel, he is ushered to the throne in front of the altar. The first to approach is the Camerlengo who slips the Ring of the Fisherman on the Pope's finger. Then the other cardinals approach and pay homage to the Vicar of Christ and their sovereign by kissing the Fisherman's Ring. Finally,

¹⁴ See *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 9, s.v. "Fischerring," part 4.

¹⁵ See *ibidem*.

¹⁶ See Waterton, "On the Annulus Piscatoris, or Ring of the Fisherman": 139.

¹⁷ See *ibidem* 141–42.

¹⁸ See *Enciclopedia Italiana di scienze, lettere ed arti*, vol. 1, s.v. "Anello del pescatore," 1219.

¹⁹ See Waterton, "On the Annulus Piscatoris, or Ring of the Fisherman": 142.

²⁰ See *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 9, s.v. "Fischerring," part 5.

after the Camerlengo announces the result of the conclave to the faithful from the balcony of the Quirinal Palace,²¹ the new pope appears with the Ring of the Fisherman on his finger.

The pope's name, together with an ordinal number—if necessary—is engraved on the front of the Fisherman's Ring before the pontiff's ceremonial inauguration.²² Since the time of Nicholas I (858) until the reign of Paul VI (1963) this took the form of a coronation,²³ which—after its abolition by the constitution *Universi Dominici Gregis*²⁴—was replaced by an inaugural Mass. An inaugural mass was celebrated for the first time after the election of John Paul I in 1978.²⁵

The process of updating the rite of the ceremony inaugurating the pope, which began during the Second Vatican Council, was not completed until the election of John Paul I in 1978, or before John Paul II became Pope on 16 October of the same year. Until 2005, the proceedings were regulated by documents printed on the occasion of each ceremony: *Ordo ad incoronandum Summum Pontificem Romanum*. The standardization of the rites did not take place until 2005 with the publication of the *Ordo rituum pro ministerii petrini initio Romae Episcopi*.²⁶ On April 24 that year, the mass inaugurating Benedict XVI's pontificate was celebrated according to the new order of rites which he approved a few hours after his election.²⁷

The Fisherman's ring was presented to Benedict XVI by the Dean of the College of Cardinals, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, and the Pope himself slipped it on his finger.²⁸ The Pope had the right to do so, as he had been the Dean of the College of Cardinals before his election. In the context of the ceremony, this gesture can be interpreted as the voluntary assumption of the succession of St Peter.

²¹ See W a t e r t o n, "On the Annulus Piscatoris, or Ring of the Fisherman": 142. See also J o h n P a u l I I, Apostolic Constitution *Universi Dominici Gregis* on the Vacancy of the Apostolic See and the Election of the Roman Pontiff, February 22, 1996, Section 89, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_22021996_universi-dominici-gregis.html; I o a n n e s P a u l u s I I, Constitutio apostolica *Universi Dominici Gregis*, 22 februarii 1996, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. 88 (Città del Vaticano: Typis Vaticanis, 1996), 305–43.

²² See *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 9, s.v. "Fischerring," part 5.

²³ See Kazimierz D o p i e r a ł a, *Księga papieży* (Poznań: Pallottinum, 1996), 104 and 417.

²⁴ See J o h n P a u l I I, *Universi Dominici Gregis*, Section 92.

²⁵ See D o p i e r a ł a, *Księga papieży*, 423.

²⁶ See *Ordo rituum pro ministerii petrini initio Romae Episcopi* (E Civitate Vaticana: Tipografia Vaticana, 2005).

²⁷ The details of these rites in relation to the recommendations of the *Ordo* were described by Jerzy Stefański. See Jerzy S t e f a ń s k i, "Liturgiczne obrzędy i zwyczaje inauguracji pontyfikatu Benedykta XVI," *Teologia Praktyczna* 8 (2007): 77.

²⁸ See *Caeremoniale Romanum*, "Ceremony of Papal Inauguration of Pope Benedict XVI [24.04.2005]," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3R8h6HdZcyk>.

Both in the case of his predecessors, including John Paul II, and his successor Francis, it was the Cardinal Camerlengo who placed the Ring of the Fisherman on the ring finger of the pope's right hand, in accordance with the custom.²⁹

During the pontificate, the Fisherman's Ring is kept by the Prefect of the Papal Household ("Magister ab admissionibus")³⁰ and a duplicate is kept in the Secretariat of State of the Holy See.

THE FISHERMAN'S RING AND THE END OF THE PONTIFICATE

Immediately after the Pope's death, the Camerlengo goes to the papal palace to formally confirm the death of the Holy Father. "The Verification of Death" is read out by the notary, after which he receives the Fisherman's Ring from the Grand Chamberlain and hands it to the Camerlengo. At the first general assembly of cardinals, held in the Stanza dei Paramenti, the Camerlengo hands the ring to the Master of Ceremonies, who destroys it, similarly to the leaden papal seal. A second way of invalidating the fisherman's ring was to deface the images—by making deep scratches—on the seal to make them illegible. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a newly elected pope often wore the fisherman's ring of his (immediate) predecessor, after removing the prior owner's name from the seal and replacing it with that of the new one. The custom of destroying the Ring of the Fisherman and the seal of the pope, or of defacing the images on the surface of the seal, was documented for the first time³¹ after the death of Leo X. Water-ton's accounts of how the rings of the Fisherman of later popes were invalidated testify that both ways of withdrawing them from use were practiced.³²

In 1975, the first way of invalidating the Fisherman's Ring was recommended in Paul VI's constitution *Pontifici eligendo*: "In one of the Congregations immediately following [the death of the Pope – K.B.], the Cardinals, according to a prearranged agenda, shall take decisions on the more urgent matters regarding the beginning of the Conclave, that is to say they shall ... arrange for the *breaking* (italics mine) of the Fisherman's Ring and the lead Seal under which Apostolic Letters are dispatched."³³ In 1996, in the Apostolic

²⁹ See Nowowiejski, "Pierścień," 407.

³⁰ See *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 9, s.v. "Fischerring," part 5.

³¹ See *ibidem*.

³² See Water-ton, "On the Annulus Piscatoris, or Ring of the Fisherman": 140–42. See also Pierre Carpentier, *Glossarium Novum Ad Scriptores Medii Aevi, Cum Latinis Tum Gallicos: Seu Supplementum ad Auctiorem Glossarii Cangiani Editionem...*, vol. 2 (Paris: Le Breton, Sailant and Desaint, 1766), col. 509.

³³ Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution on the Vacancy of the Apostolic See and the Election of the Roman Pontiff *Romano Pontifici Eligendo*, Section 13, EWTN, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/romani-pontifici-eligendo-9027>. This order in the Latin version of the Constitution

Constitution *Universi Dominici Gregis*, John Paul II also ordered excluding the Fisherman's Ring from use, but in somewhat different words. The "destruction" appears only in the English version, whereas the Latin "delendere"³⁴ can mean "to destroy" and "to wipe out" as well, and Italian "annullare"³⁵ can be translated as "to cancel" or "to annul." The destruction of the Fisherman's Ring is not unnecessary to prevent its use as a seal. Regardless of the form of this act, its performance is still required and marks the official end of the pontificate.

CHANGE OF THE FORM OF THE RING OF THE FISHERMAN

As mentioned above, in 1842, the wax-impressed seal of the Fisherman's Ring was replaced by a stamp using red ink, on which the representation from the Fisherman's Ring was retained.³⁶ Archbishop Piero Marini described this change as follows: "It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the *anulus piscatoris* (fisherman's ring) lost the form of a ring and took the shape of a simple seal. Although the *anulus piscatoris* of the Bishops of Rome went out of use as a seal and lost the form of a ring, it has been preserved until our time as testimony that the original symbolism of a tenth-century bishop's ring was that of a seal."³⁷

It may be assumed that the change in the form of the Fisherman's Ring, and therefore the modification to the meaning of the papal ring in general, was also influenced by political and religious events in Europe, starting with the French Revolution.

reads: "Anulus Piscatoris et Sigillum plumbeum, sub quibus Litterae Apostolicae expediuntur, curent *frangenda* (italics mine)." P a u l u s VI, Constitutio apostolica *Romano Pontifici eligendo*, 1 octobris 1975, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. 67 (1975) ([Città del Vaticano]: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1975), 616. In this document, both Latin and Italian terms can be translated into English as "to break."

³⁴ "Anulus Piscatoris et Sigillum plumbeum ... curent *delenda* (italics mine)." J o h n P a u l II, *Universi Dominici Gregis*, Section 13g.

³⁵ "Provvedano a far *annullare* (italics mine) l'Anello del Pescatore e il Sigillo di piombo." J o h n P a u l II, *Universi Dominici Gregis*, Section 13g.

³⁶ See Arthur G i r y, *Manuel de diplomatique: Diplômes et chartes, chronologie technique, éléments critiques et parties constitutives de la teneur des chartes*, (Paris: Librairie Hachette et C^{ie}, 1894), 701; *Enciclopedia Italiana di scienze, lettere ed arti*, vol. 1, s.v. "Anello del pescatore," 1219–20.

³⁷ P i e r o M a r i n i, *Liturgia i piękno: Nobilis pulchritudo*, trans. Wiesława Dzieża (Pelplin: Bernardinum, 2007), 125. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. See also P i e r o M a r i n i, *Liturgia e bellezza, "nobilis pulchritudo": A memoria di una esperienza vissuta nelle celebrazioni liturgiche del Santo Padre* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005).

Msgr. Piero Marini (born 1942) is a Doctor of Theological Sciences in Liturgy and Archbishop of Martirano. From 1987 to 2007, during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, he was Master of the Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff.

Since the end of the eighteenth century onwards, there is a repetitive account in the literature that Pope Pius VI (1775–1799) was deprived of the Fisherman's Ring in 1798, during the seizure of the Papal States by the French.³⁸ The earliest published account, of 1799, was that of Pierre-Louis Blanchard and Augustin Barruel: Pius VI removed from his finger one of “the two beautiful rings”³⁹ that had caught Haller's attention, saying: “I can give you this one... as to the other, it must pass to my successor.”⁴⁰ The commissary, however, insisted and also took the second ring from the pope which “was the ring of the fisherman, which serves as the seal of all popes,”⁴¹ but finding that it was of little value, he returned it to the pope the following day. This account shows that Pius VI got the Fisherman's Ring back.

An eyewitness to these events, Pietro Baldassari, wrote that the Pope himself showed the diamond ring to Haller, who was searching his private rooms saying, “Here is the only jewel left to us; but we are not its master. We received it from our predecessors, and we must leave it to the successor whom God will give us.”⁴² Therefore, it was most likely the pontifical ring. Bishop Pelczar shortened and over-dramatized this account,⁴³ while omitting the fact that the ring was later returned to the Pope. The Rev. Alfred Wróblewski, although shaken by the event, nevertheless upheld the gist of Baldassari's report, writing that Haller returned the ring to the Pope, having recognized that it “had no value.”⁴⁴ Pius VI, who was later arrested and deported, thus retained the Fisherman's Ring while in exile.

Baldassari mentions yet another ring, which was melted down by Pius VI “before Haller's eyes.”⁴⁵ Elsewhere in his book, however, he testified: “A valuable ring, not mentioned in the inventory, survived the looting carried out by the French. It was not the Ring of the Fisherman, but a diamond ring with a rosette, worn by Pope Pius VI's predecessors. After his death, [Arch]Bishop

³⁸ See Pierre-Louis Blanchard, Augustin Barruel, *Histoire civile, politique et religieuse de Pie VI: Écrire sur des mémoires authentiques par un Français catholique-romain* (Avignon: Marchands de Nouveautés, 1801), 343; Charles Du Rozoir, *Eloge de Pie VI: Avec l'histoire religieuse de l'Europe sous son pontificat...* (Paris: Arthus Bertrand Libraire, 1825), 314; Józef Sebastian Pelczar, *Pius IX i jego pontyfikat na tle dziejów Kościoła*, vol. 1 (Przemyśl: Nakładem Autora, 1908), 10.

³⁹ Blanchard and Barruel, *Histoire civile, politique et religieuse de Pie VI: Écrire sur des mémoires authentiques par un Français catholique-romain*, 343.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² Pietro Baldassari, *Histoire de l'enlèvement et de la captivité de Pie VI* (Brussels: Vanderborght, 1840), 203.

⁴³ See Pelczar, *Pius IX i jego pontyfikat na tle dziejów Kościoła*, vol. 1, 9–10.

⁴⁴ Alfred Wróblewski, *Kwiaty z ogrodów papieży: Papieże świętych polskich; Pius XI* ([Albano]: Drukarnia Siostr Najświętszej Rodziny z Nazaretu, 1930), 37.

⁴⁵ Baldassari, *Histoire de l'enlèvement et de la captivité de Pie VI*, 229.

[Giuseppe Maria] Spina sent it to the conclave [in Venice]. After his election [on 14 March 1800], Pius VII received this ring from the hands of the Dean of the College of Cardinals.⁴⁶ The author went on to explain: “What is called the Fisherman’s Ring is a large gold seal, costing one hundred Roman crowns (524 Fr.) with two impressions, one of which represents Saint Peter casting his nets from his boat, and the other—the name of the reigning pope. It is used to seal, with sealing wax or lead bulls, documents which are signed only by the secretary, and is equivalent to the signature of His Holiness himself.”⁴⁷

According to the surviving accounts, Pius VII (1800–1823), who was arrested on July 5, 1809, on the order of Napoleon, was also deprived of the Ring of the Fisherman by General Étienne Radet.⁴⁸ This was one of the punishments inflicted on the pope for opposing the emperor’s usurpation of the appointment of bishops without papal approval.⁴⁹ This occurred between March 11 and 14, 1811, but before that Pius VII instructed members of his entourage to break the ring to prevent its abuse. When describing the event, Count Joseph d’Haussonville emphasized that it was the first time that the Fisherman’s Ring had been destroyed during a Pope’s lifetime.⁵⁰ At the time, the Pope ordered that the ring be made of iron, with the engraved heads of the Apostles Peter and Paul and the inscriptions: “Pius Papa VII” (surrounding the representation) and “Pro An.[nulo] Piscatorio” (at the bottom). The Fisherman’s Ring, along with other looted objects, was returned to the pope in 1814 by King Louis XVIII,⁵¹ who had the pope freed⁵²—after Napoleon lost power on March 10. Meanwhile, a new ring had been made in Rome.⁵³ During the period of Pius VI’s and Pius VII’s loss of power, the hallowed status of the Fisherman’s Ring as a papal insignia was both questioned and violated. This necessitated the introduction of changes (making the ring of iron), sanctioned under the pontificate of Gregory XVI (1831–1846) by separating the function of the Fisherman’s seal and its form as a ring in 1842. The direct cause of the change in the form of the seal (from a ring to a stamp) was the change in the technique used to impress the seal and the material used (the sealing wax was replaced by ink).

⁴⁶ Ibidem, 506.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, 506–7.

⁴⁸ See W r ó b l e w s k i, *Kwiaty z ogrodów papieży*, 37.

⁴⁹ See Franciszek Ksawery S e p p e l t and Klemens L ö f f l e r, *Dzieje papieży: Od początków Kościoła do czasów dzisiejszych*, ed. Tadeusz Silnicki, trans. Juliusz Kozolubski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Polskie R. Wegnera, 1936), 487–88.

⁵⁰ M. le comte d’H a u s s o n v i l l e, *L’Église romaine et le Premier Empire 1800–1814*, vol. 3 (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1870), 583–85.

⁵¹ See W r ó b l e w s k i, *Kwiaty z ogrodów papieży*, 37; *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 9, s.v. “Fischerring,” part 5.

⁵² See S e p p e l t and L ö f f l e r, *Dzieje papieży*, 492–93.

⁵³ See *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 9, s.v. “Fischerring,” part 5.

CHANGES IN THE MEANING OF THE FISHERMAN'S RING
UNDER JOHN PAUL II, BENEDICT XVI, AND FRANCIS

The modification turned out to be a permanent one, and the previous form of the Fisherman's Ring was only reinstated during the pontificate of Benedict XVI (2005–2013). Despite the change in the form of the seal, successive popes received a ring during the inauguration ceremony—the coronation and later the Mass—which was referred to (and not only by the media) as the Fisherman's Ring. However, Archbishop Marini, when writing about the papal ring from the mid-nineteenth century to the beginning of Benedict XVI's pontificate, consistently omits the term "Fisherman's Ring" (in line with what was said earlier, i.e., that the ring "became" a seal). He states: "After the Second Vatican Council, the ring of the Bishop of Rome, now without a precious stone, took on a simplified form which conformed to the noble simplicity prescribed by the Council. However, the ring of the Pope remained similar to others and is not distinguishable from the ring of other bishops. Pope John Paul II, for example, always wore the ring he received from Pope Paul VI on 26 June 1967 on the occasion of the consistory at which he was made a cardinal."⁵⁴

This ring was of a simple form, inspired by the form of a cross. The front depicted a vertical upright post while a crosspiece formed the arms. The elongated rectangle showed a seated male figure with a book in low relief. On either side, on the arms, in geometric relief were—on the right of the figure—the Christogram Chi Rho, i.e., the first two letters—X P—of the Greek word "Christos," which is the messianic title of Jesus. The letters A and Ω were inscribed on the right arm of the cross preceded by the letter X. To the left of the saint was depicted an outline of a fish inscribed with the Greek word "ICHTHUS," meaning "fish," which is also an acrostic of the first letters of the phrase "Jesus Christ, God's Son, the Savior."

John Paul II wore that ring throughout his pontificate, as attested to by papal iconography. In the mass media, it was often identified with the Fisherman's Ring and referred to as such. For example, a copy of it—under the name of a "copy of the Fisherman's Ring"—was presented at the exhibition "Giovanni Paolo II—A cent'anni dalla nascita" at the Arte Poli Gallery in Rome, held from October 16, 2020, to April 2, 2021.⁵⁵ Only the encyclopedic supplement to *Monitore Napoletano* states that the object was not the Fisherman's Ring

⁵⁴ Marini, *Liturgia i piekno*, 125.

⁵⁵ See "Giovanni Paolo II—A cent'anni dalla nascita. Mostra di oggetti, opere d'arte e fotografie sul Papa Santo," poliartesaera.com, https://www.poliartesaera.com/pdf/comunicato-stampa-S-GP-II-Galleria_Arte_Poli.pdf.

of John Paul II—which had an oval front—but a bishop’s ring given to him by Pope Paul VI.⁵⁶

After the death of John Paul II, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, the Director of the Holy See’s Press Office, informed the press that on Saturday, April 16, 2005, during the twelfth and last General Congregation, attended by 143 cardinals, the Spanish Cardinal Eduardo Martínez Somalo destroyed the Fisherman’s Ring and the lead seal of Pope John Paul II, in accordance with the Apostolic Constitution *Universi Dominici Gregis*.⁵⁷ According to its Latin text, the constitution ordered that the seal and the Fisherman’s Ring be “destroyed” or “obliterated” (*delenda*). In the document’s Italian version, the verb “annul” (*far annullare*) is used, and in the English one, we read about “the destruction.”⁵⁸ However, the meaning of the extract in question is that the use of the Fisherman’s Ring as a seal should be prevented, with or without breaking it. The latter interpretation was adopted by John Paul II’s successor, Benedict XVI, who, when abdicating, ordered that two lines forming a cross be engraved on the front of his Fisherman’s Ring.

In conclusion, the ring which John Paul II wore throughout his pontificate was not, strictly speaking, a Fisherman’s Ring since the aforementioned separation of the function of a seal and its form as a ring had been ongoing since 1842. It was, however, identified with the Fisherman’s Ring in popular discourse, and after the pope’s death the cardinals followed the procedure prescribed for this type of insignia.

The presentation of symbols so closely associated with the papacy, such as the Fisherman’s Ring and a likeness of St. Peter the Fisherman, was reinstated by Benedict XVI during his pontificate. “On the occasion of the beginning of Pope Benedict XVI’s Petrine ministry, it seemed appropriate that the Pope’s episcopal ring, while retaining the current shape and simplicity of bishops’ rings, should bear a distinctive feature indicating that the person wearing it is the successor of the Apostle Peter. The *Anulus piscatoris* once again took the shape of a ring bearing a likeness of a fisherman from Galilee and had the pope’s name engraved on it. It again became a sign of the special *munus* of Peter’s Successor.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ See Supplemento Enciclopedico del *Monitore Napoletano*, s.v. “Anello del Pescatore,” *Monitopedia*, <https://www.monitorenapoletano.it/monitopedia/enciclopedia/a/342-anello-del-pescatore.html>.

⁵⁷ See Catholic News Agency, “Cardinals Finish Meetings: John Paul’s Fisherman’s Ring Destroyed,” CAN, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/3658/cardinals-finish-meetings-john-pauls-fishermans-ring-destroyed>.

⁵⁸ See J o h n P a u l II, *Universi Dominici Gregis*, Section 13g.

⁵⁹ M a r i n i, *Liturgia i piękno*, 125–26.

The Fisherman's Ring of Benedict XVI was made in 2005 by Claudio Franchi, a master goldsmith and art historian who descends from a family of Roman goldsmiths.⁶⁰ He made two versions of the ring: a classic one, with a likeness of St. Peter modelled on Leo XIII's Fisherman's Ring, and a modern one, with a stylized figure of a Fisherman in a boat rendered with long wavy bands of relief. Out of the two, Benedict XVI chose the classic version. As mentioned earlier, he was the first Pope in two centuries to restore the Fisherman's Ring to its earlier form. However, as was the case with the ring of Leo XIII, it was not a signet ring, because the pope's name was not engraved in a mirror image and the front of the ring was not adapted for making impressions with the use of ink or sealing wax. What is worth highlighting, though, is that the pope recalled and updated the symbolism of this insignia.

When Pope Benedict XVI was fitted for his ring, he commented that he liked the size 24: "It is the double of 12," he said, referring to the Twelve Apostles⁶¹. The ring was given to Benedict XVI on April 24, 2005, during the Mass inaugurating his pontificate. In his homily delivered on that occasion, the Pope explained the symbolism of the Fisherman's Ring in connection with the symbolism of the pallium: these insignia signify that the Pope is the Good Shepherd and Fisher of Men, who, unlike an ordinary fisherman, pulls people out of the salty waters of death towards the light and a life in Christ.⁶² These words allude to the Hymn to Christ the Savior, composed in the second century by St. Clement of Alexandria.⁶³

The Fisherman's Ring, materially and symbolically restored to life, was worn by the Pope on a day-to-day basis. After the abdication that ended Benedict XVI's pontificate, Claudio Franchi called for the ring not to be destroyed, above all because of its symbolic value.⁶⁴ The plea was actually unnecessary because John Paul II did not equate the invalidation of the Fisherman's Ring after the end of his pontificate with its breaking. Pope Benedict took advantage of this opportunity by requesting that the front of the ring be incised with

⁶⁰ See Euronews, "L'artigiano orafo che fabbrica l'anello del papa," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLsK-ndwZ7Q>.

⁶¹ Quoted in "Inaugural Mass Full of New Symbolic Gestures Which Emphasize Pope as Successor of Peter," Catholic Culture, <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=6438>.

⁶² [Benedict XVI], "Mass, Imposition of the Pallium and Conferral of the Fisherman's Ring for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome: Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI," St. Peter's Square, Sunday, April 24, 2005, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html.

⁶³ See Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor [Paedagogus]*, 631–33.

⁶⁴ See D. Philippi, "The Piscatory Ring (*Anulus piscatoris*) of Pope Benedict XVI; L'artigiano orafo che fabbrica l'anello del papa," Philippi Collection, <http://www.dieter-philippi.de/en/ecclesiastical-fineries/ring-of-the-fisherman-piscatory-ring>.

a cross to invalidate it as a papal seal and continued to wear it when he was Pope Emeritus.

Benedict XVI's successor, Francis, whose pontificate began in 2013, immediately became known in media discourse as the Pope who launched a new course in the Vatican, voicing a wish for a poor Church for the poor.⁶⁵ The first fulfilment of this pronouncement was his choice of Fisherman's Ring, which was to be made of gold-plated silver rather than of gold. The words of the Pope-elect, "the ring will be silver,"⁶⁶ have been quoted as the motto of the new pontificate.

Before and shortly after the inauguration of Pope Francis's pontificate, Federico Lombardi, the Director of the Vatican Press Office, reported that of the three designs presented by Msgr. Guido Marini, the Master of Pontifical Liturgical Celebrations, Pope Bergoglio chose the design by Enrico Manfrini, an artist who died in Milan in 2004 at the age of 87, also known as "the sculptor of popes."⁶⁷ The ring depicts St. Peter with the keys rather than as a fisherman.⁶⁸ The model for this ring was given by Manfrini to Rev. Pasquale Macchi, Paul VI's secretary.⁶⁹ As Msgr. Ettore Malnati noticed, "Even Pope Francis's choice, although seemingly insignificant, shows continuity in the style and spirit of the Council desired by John XXIII and completed by Paul VI, which is being resurrected with the original figure, but also with references to the two popes of Vatican II."⁷⁰

On March 19, 2013, before the Inaugural Mass of Pope Francis, the ring was slipped on his finger by Cardinal Angelo Sodano. On a day-to-day basis, the Pope wears a silver ring with an equilateral cross on the front.

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The Fisherman's Ring, which has been the insignia of the Bishops of Rome since at least the thirteenth century, can be considered a category of artefacts

⁶⁵ See Today Cronaca, "Papa Francesco sorprende ancora: rifiuta l'anello d'oro," today.it, <https://www.today.it/cronaca/anello-papa-francesco.html>.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Cronaca, video.corriere.it, <https://video.corriere.it/papa-francesco-anello-sara-argento-stemma-motto-quelli-vescovo/eadaf5f0-8fd5-11e2-a149-c4a425fe1e94>.

⁶⁷ See "Enrico Manfrini Bronze Travelling Icon 'The Life of Christ' Gift of Pope Paul VI," WorthPoint, <https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/enrico-manfrini-bronze-travelling-507508941>.

⁶⁸ See La Voce di Fiore, "Papa Francesco, l'anello d'oro o d'argento e' lo stesso: Segua l'esempio di Giovanni XXIII e Giovanni Paolo II; Lo restituisca a san Giuseppe – Auguri di buon-inizio da 'la Voce di Fiore,'" http://www.lavocedifiore.org/SPIP/article.php3?id_article=5611.

⁶⁹ See "Papa Francesco sorprende ancora: rifiuta l'anello d'oro."

⁷⁰ See "Inaugural Mass Full of New Symbolic Gestures Which Emphasize Pope as Successor of Peter."

whose existence is conditioned not only by the liturgy and ecclesiastical law, but also by the changes taking place in the Church and in the institution of the papacy, as well as by the spirituality and individual understanding of their ministry by the successors of St. Peter. The search for the most appropriate motif to adorn the Fisherman's Ring (continued in the first centuries of its functioning), the decision to change the form of the seal and the subsequent restoration of the Ring by Pope Benedict XVI, and the emphasis on the modesty of the papal insignia by Francis can be understood as the response of Christianity—with its universal and timeless values—to the ongoing changes in ideas and social values.

In 1866, Waterton claimed that the *Annulus Piscatoris* could be called the Pontifical Ring of Investiture. This term relates primarily to the transference of spiritual content that takes place through the insignia, somewhat independently of its material shape. The insignia is also a conveyor of transcendent values transmitted to the whole Church, not only directly, but also through the visual arts and mass media. Previously unknown technical possibilities concerning the visualization of forms and decorations, the dissemination of the content of inscriptions, the history of the object, the explanation of symbolism, have been the most important phenomenon concerning Church art for a dozen or so years. This phenomenon is of particular importance especially in relation to objects as elite and unique as copies of the Fisherman's Ring. The question remains open, however, whether their social message has the power to break through the "flood" of signs and symbols from other axiological orders.

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ABSTRACT / ABSTRAKT

Katarzyna BOGACKA, The Fisherman's Ring: Its Social History and Contemporary Meaning

DOI 10.12887/37-2024-4-148-08

The pontificates of Pope John Paul II and his two successors, Benedict XVI and Francis, provide material for reflection and analysis in relation to the most recognizable type of papal ring, namely, the Fisherman's Ring. This article aims to show the historical, liturgical, and social circumstances which have affected the contemporary meaning of the Fisherman's Ring. The analysis of the literature, papal iconography, and media messages helps determine the extent to which the form, symbolic meaning, and the use of the Fisherman's Ring are subjects to change, as well as factors that trigger such change.

Keywords: Fisherman's ring, Fisherman's Seal, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis, social history

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Katarzyna BOGACKA – Pierścień Rybaka: społeczna historia i współczesne znaczenie

DOI 10.12887/37-2024-4-148-08

Pontyfikaty papieża Jana Pawła II oraz jego następców: Benedykta XVI i Franciszka, dostarczają materiału do refleksji i analiz w odniesieniu do najbardziej rozpoznawalnego rodzaju pierścienia papieskiego, jakim jest Pierścień Rybaka. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu ukazanie historycznych, liturgicznych i społecznych uwarunkowań współczesnego znaczenia Pierścienia Rybaka. Analiza piśmiennictwa, ikonografii papieskiej i przekazów medialnych prowadzi do

ustalenia, w jakim zakresie i w wyniku jakich uwarunkowań zmianom podlega jego forma, znaczenie symboliczne i sposób używania.

Słowa kluczowe: Pierścień Rybaka, Pieczęć Rybaka, papież Jan Paweł II, papież Benedykt XVI, papież Franciszek, historia społeczna

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