

Postal History of the Sede Vacante by Greg Pirozzi

Originally appeared in *Vatican Notes* 43: 2 (Sept. 1994). Updated 2005.

©1994-2005 Greg Pirozzi. All rights reserved worldwide.

The interregnum, or period between the passing of one pontiff and the election of his successor, is known by the Latin term *sede vacante* (vacancy of the Holy See). Since the establishment of an independent Vatican City State in 1929, there have been six such periods. During the *sede vacante*, special stamps are issued to mourn and pay tribute to the dead pontiff. These stamps are valid only during this period. A particularly difficult challenge in collecting the postal history of these stamp issues is their limited period of validity. The table below lists the year and duration of each period of *sede vacante*, the stamps issued (Scott #), date of issue, and their period of validity.

Year	Duration	Scott #	Issue date	Valid Until	Deceased Pope
1939	Feb. 10 – Mar. 3	61-67	2-18-1939	3-3-1939	Pius XI
1958	Oct. 9 – Oct. 28	247-249	10-21-1958	10-28-1958	Pius XII
1963	June 3 – June 21	362-364	6-15-1963	6-21-1963	John XXIII
1978	Aug. 6 – Aug. 26	635-637	8-23-1978	8-26-1978	Paul VI
1978	Sept. 28 – Oct. 16	638-640	10-12-1978	10-16-1978	John Paul I
2005	Apr. 2 - Apr. 19	1292-1294	4-12-2005	4-19-2005	John Paul II

As one can see from the above table, the average duration of the *sede vacante* was approximately three weeks. However, the period of validity of each issue was much shorter. For example, the issue for Paul VI was valid only four days. Illustrated in Figure 1 is a picture postcard dated February 10, 1939, the first day of the *sede vacante* following the death of Pius XI as noted in the message.

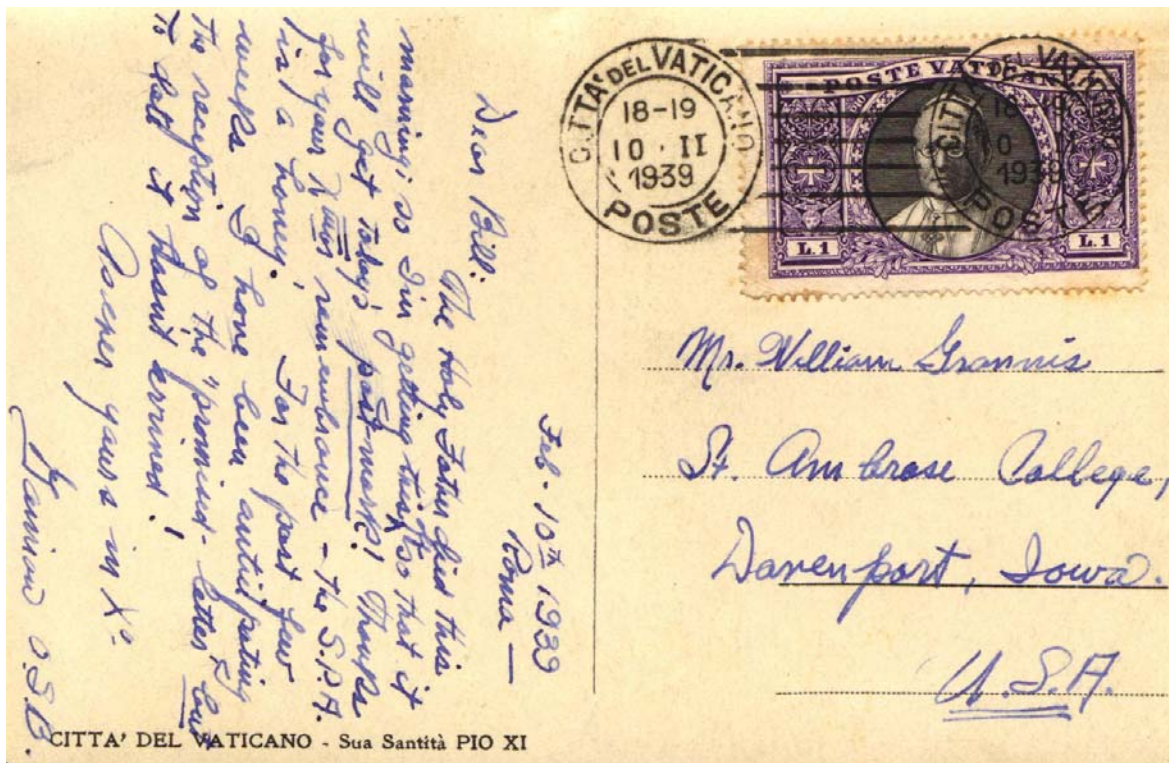


FIGURE 1.

Although obviously not franked with the special *sede vacante* stamps, arguably any postally used item franked with valid stamps used during this period has a place in a *sede vacante* postal history collection. The last day of

the Pius XI *sede vacante* was March 3, 1939 and the commercial cover illustrated in Figure 2 is franked with Scott #66 and 67 and postmarked on that date. The L.1,25 postage pays the external letter fee.



FIGURE 2.

Mixed frankings of a *sede vacante* issue with a commemorative and/or definitive issue are particularly difficult to find. Such a cover is shown in Figure 3, addressed to Switzerland and postmarked February 20, 1939.



FIGURE 3.

An interesting collateral item is shown in Figure 4. This is an entrance ticket to Saint Peter's Basilica on Sunday, February 19, 1939 for the special funeral Mass held for Pope Pius XI. Affixed to the ticket is the complete *sede vacante* issue cancelled on February 22, 1939.

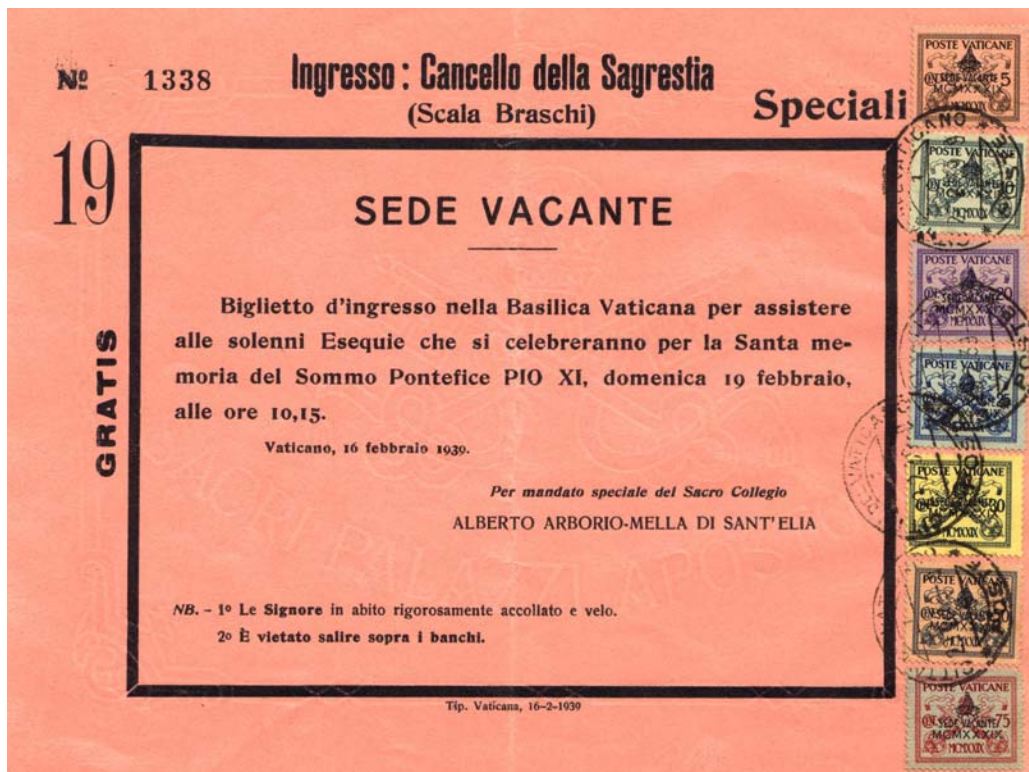


FIGURE 4.

Figure 5 illustrates a cover postmarked October 24, 1958, during the *sede vacante* for Pius XII. It is an airmail cover franked with a corner block of five for a total of L.300 in postage. The rate breaks down as follows: L.60 for an external letter + L.240 airmail surcharge to the USA (4 x L.60 for each 5 grams).

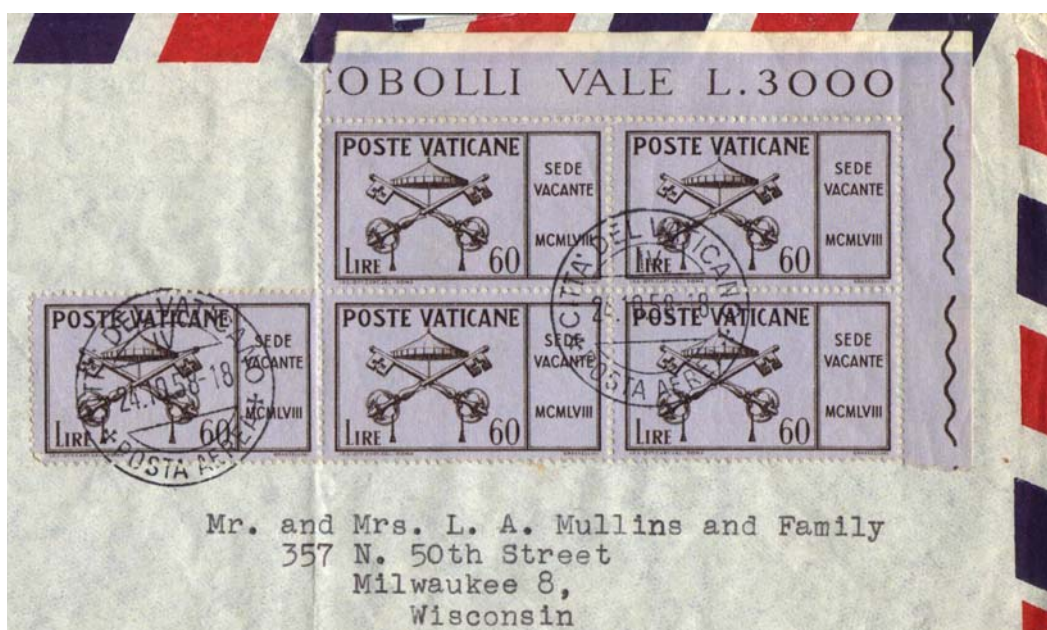


FIGURE 5.

Figure 6 illustrates a picture postcard postmarked on June 25, 1963 during the *sede vacante* for Pope John XXIII. The L.40 value pays the external postcard rate. The writer mentions looking for the white smoke to appear from the roof of the Sistine Chapel where the papal conclave was held. Traditionally, the appearance of white smoke indicates that a new pontiff has been elected. In fact, later that same day Pope Paul VI was elected.

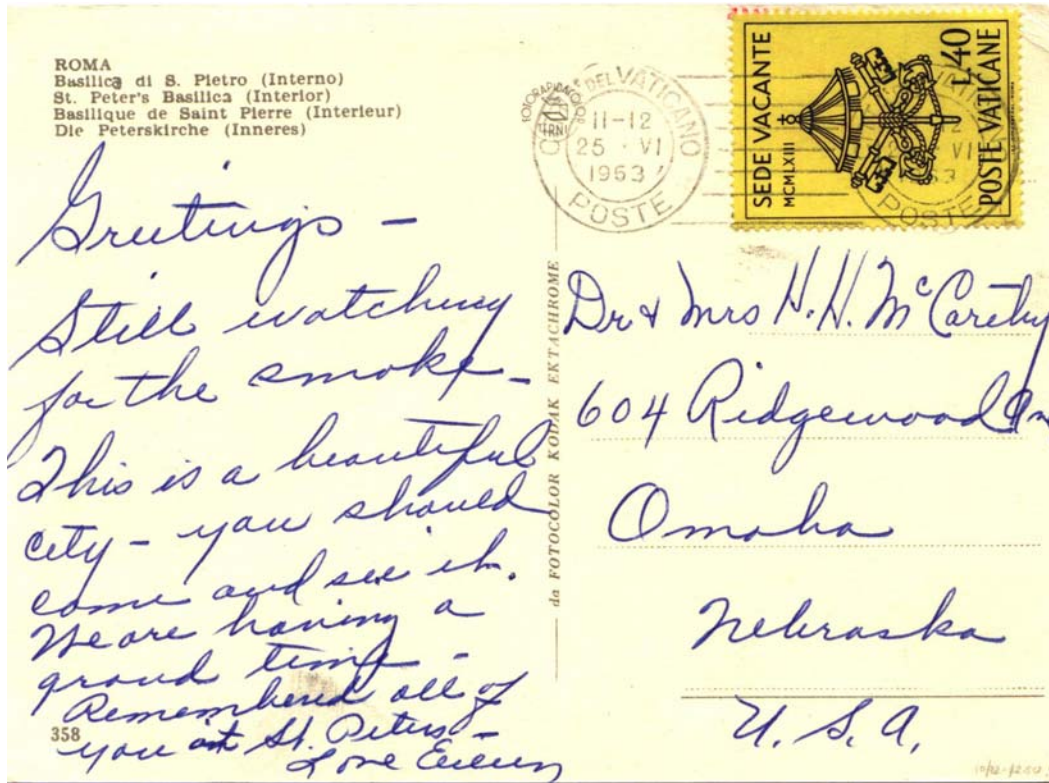


FIGURE 6.

Another cover from the same *sede vacante* is shown in figure 7. Sent via registered airmail, the rate is as follows: L.70 external letter + L.90 external registration + L.240 airmail surcharge to the USA.



FIGURE 7.

Postal History of the Sede Vacante: An Update by Greg Pirozzi

Originally appeared in *Vatican Notes* 50:6 (May 2002)

©2002-2005 Greg Pirozzi. All rights reserved worldwide.

In the September 1994 issue of the *Vatican Notes*, I discussed the postal history of the *sede vacante* stamps issued by the Vatican to mark the mourning period between the death of one pontiff and the election of his successor. From a postal history standpoint, the interesting characteristic of these issues is their short period of postal validity. Illustrated in Figure 1 is an uncommon commercial usage of the 1939 *sede vacante* issue. The cover is postmarked February 20, 1939 and franked with a total of 80c., paying the letter rate to destinations in Italy.



FIGURE 1.

Another facet of *sede vacante* postal history is the collecting of covers franked with other stamp issues that were valid and used within this brief period. The search for such material, while probably not as elusive as usages of the *sede vacante* issues proper, is highly worthwhile and arguably a proper extension of the postal history of the *sede vacante* period.

The following examples illustrate the type of material one can find during this period. Illustrated in Figure 2 is a picture postcard franked with the 30c. value of the Gardens and Medallions issue postmarked Feb. 23, 1939 and addressed to Budapest, Hungary. Although the card is over-franked by 5c. – 25c. was the picture postcard rate to foreign destinations from 1929 to 1944 – it is nevertheless an extremely scarce destination for the *sede vacante* period following the death of Pope Pius XI (Feb. 10 to March 3, 1939).



FIGURE 2.

Figure 3 illustrates an airmail cover postmarked Oct. 10, 1958 during the *sede vacante* following the death of Pope Pius XII (Oct. 9 to Oct. 28, 1958). The cover is addressed to Francis Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York, and is franked with a total of 240L, which breaks down as 60L. external letter rate for up to 20 grams + 3x the 60L. airmail rate to destinations in North America for each 5g. in weight. Thus, the letter weighed between 15 and 20g.

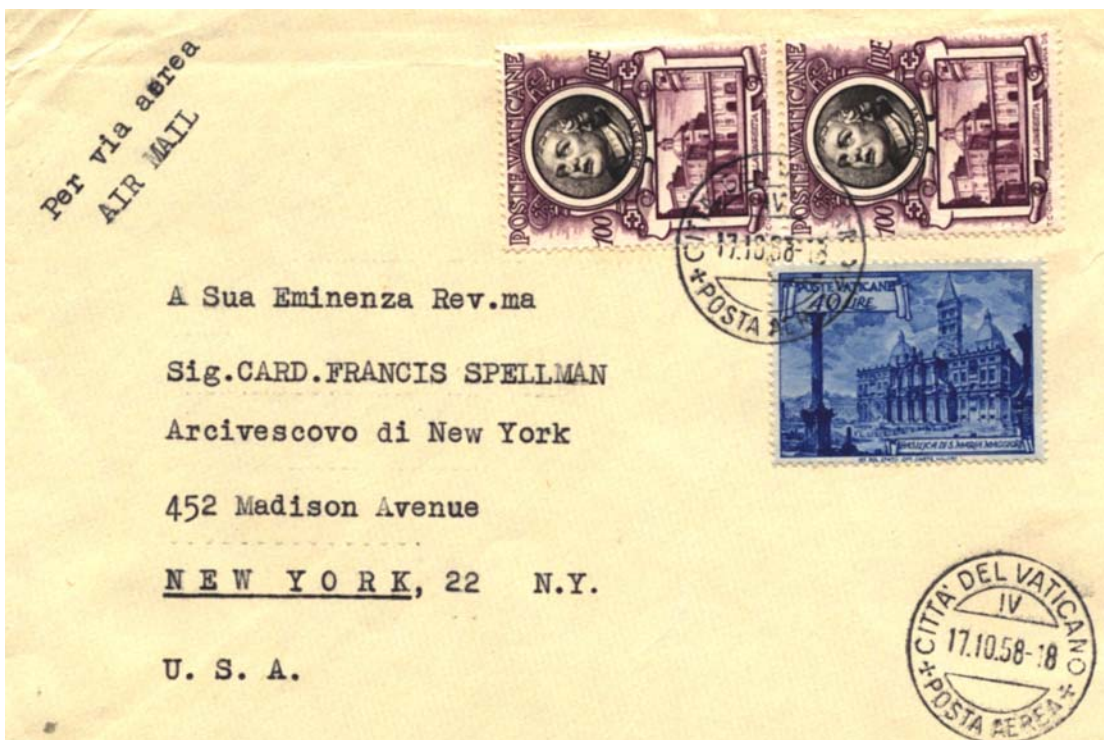


FIGURE 3.

The next example, Figure 4, was used during the *sede vacante* period following the death of Pope John XXIII (June 3, 1963 to June 21, 1963). This cover is franked with a total of 60L. in postage using two values of the 1960 Works of Mercy issue and postmarked June 14, 1963. In addition to the *sede vacante* period of usage, this cover is also an example of an uncommon concessionary printed matter (*stampe*) rate of 10L. to external destinations extended to Vatican publishers (in effect from Oct. 1, 1957) and a 50L. airmail fee for printed matter material (from June 26, 1953). The cover originated from the missionary news agency *Agenzia Internazionale Fides* located in the palace of Propaganda Fide, an extraterritorial Vatican property in Rome.

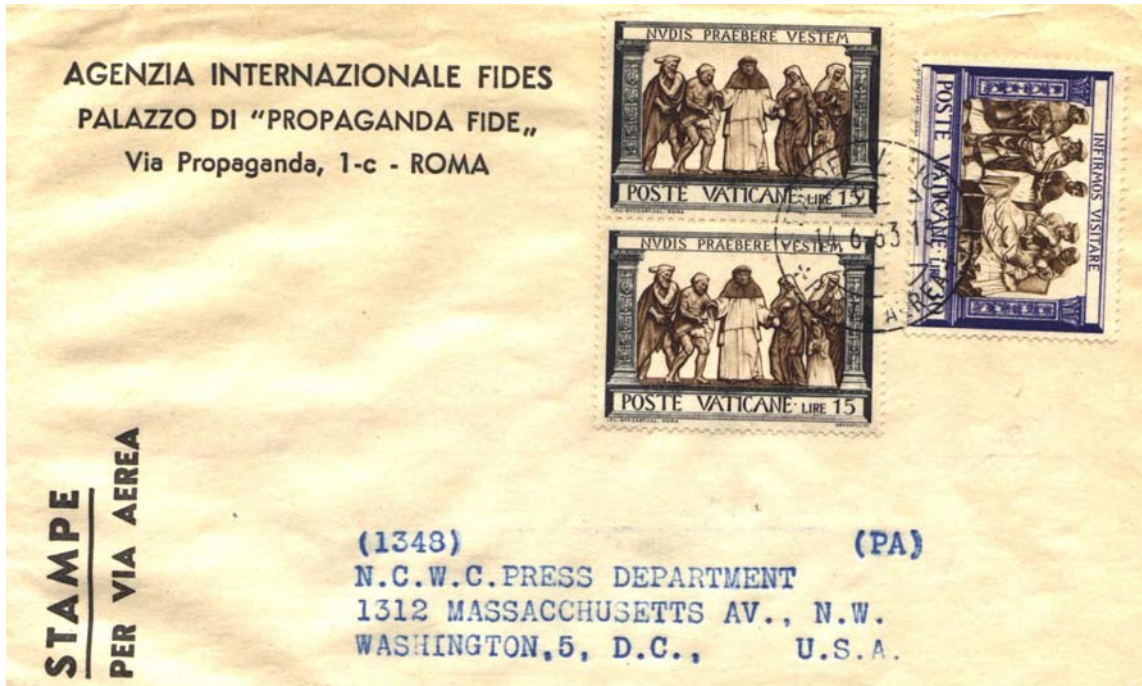


FIGURE 4.

The final item (Figure 5) is a picture postcard addressed to New Zealand and postmarked on Sept. 28, 1978, the first day of the *sede vacante* period for Pope John Paul I. The card is franked with 320L in postage, paying the postcard rate plus the airmail surcharge to nations located in Oceania.

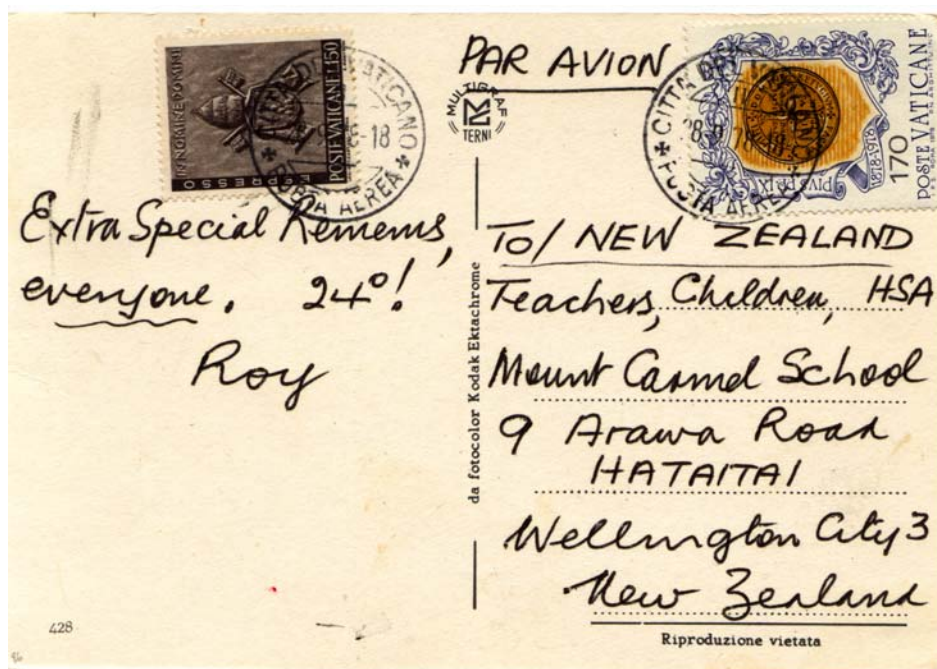


FIGURE 5.