



AQVA Catastrophe and Wonder– Year I (2026–2027)

On Monday, 14 September 2026, His Holiness Pope Leo XIV will unveil AQVA, a major new exhibition at the Vatican Apostolic Library and the opening chapter of its five-year cycle, *Catastrophe and Wonder*. Featuring site-specific interventions by three leading contemporary figures — artist JR, typographer Bill Moran, and chef Fulvio Pierangelini — the exhibition creates an extraordinary dialogue with the Pope's library, exploring water in its dual role as both a destructive force and a life-giving resource. The initiative is presented in institutional partnership with Fondazione Roma and with the generous support of Intesa Sanpaolo.

Vatican City, 9 September 2026

On Monday, 14 September 14 2026, His Holiness Pope Leo XIV will officially inaugurate AQVA, the landmark opening exhibition of the Vatican Apostolic Library's new five-year cycle, *Catastrophe and Wonder* (*Catastrofe e Meraviglia*). Marking a dynamic new chapter in the Library's centuries-long mission of preservation and public engagement, the ambitious multi-year initiative offers a wide-ranging, interdisciplinary exploration of the natural elements – framing them as mirrors to humanity's deepest fears and highest hopes.

Conceived as an immersive journey through the environmental and human threats that have historically imperilled the written word – ranging from water and fire to light, insects, and human intervention – *Catastrophe and Wonder* invites visitors to look beyond fear to discover new avenues of interpretation and artistic creation. The very forces that threaten our collective memory are reimagined as universal allegories for the anxieties surrounding all that lies beyond human control.

The inaugural showcase, AQVA, examines the fundamental duality of water as both a life-giving force and a destructive power. The exhibition unfolds as an immersive experience that weaves together history, science, and contemporary languages, guiding visitors from an initial sense of threat toward a gradual reconciliation with the natural world – an issue that is more urgent than ever in the context of the global climate crisis facing our planet. The experience opens with *Diluvium*, a monumental site-specific installation by acclaimed artist JR. Adorning the Library's 16th-century facade, the work serves as a striking visual meditation on the fragility of knowledge and memory. From there, visitors explore the rich intersections between the Vatican's centuries-old heritage, the marine world, and contemporary interventions by Bill Moran and Fulvio Pierangelini, culminating in the evocative Barberini Hall, transformed for the occasion into a space for quiet contemplation.

At the scientific and symbolic heart of the exhibition lies two extraordinary copies of Ippolito Salviani's *Aquatilium animalium historia* (1557), a masterpiece uniting scientific inquiry, fine printmaking, and culinary culture. "*The AQVA exhibition provides a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the 470th anniversary of this landmark treatise on fish,*" explains Don Giacomo Cardinali, Vice Prefect and Commissioner for Exhibition Activities. "*Authored by the physician Ippolito Salviani, it was originally published in Rome in 1557 at the direct initiative and expense of the Vatican Library itself.*"

Alongside Salviani's masterwork, a curated selection of manuscripts, printed books, engravings, and artefacts from the Vatican collections illustrates the timeless relationship between water and human



knowledge – ranging from Apicius's ancient culinary text *De re coquinaria* to the travel narratives of Giovanni Battista Ramusio, marine bestiaries, and aquatic numismatics.

"Believing that the wisest response to fear is to pause and confront it directly, we invited three extraordinarily creative minds to dialogue with our heritage," Don Giacomo Cardinali adds. *"In doing so, we have discovered unexpected horizons within the very elements that typically daunt us."*

JR presents two site-specific installations of profound visual and emotional weight, challenging our perceptions of the boundary between nature and culture. To quote the words of JR *"There is something almost mystical about books. These fragile objects contain the thoughts of the world; they carry voices, stories and knowledge across centuries. Their strength is immense, and so is their vulnerability: paper resists none of the elements. By bringing a wave into the Vatican Library, DILUVIUM and UNDAE confront this paradox. What can survive, and what do we choose to preserve?"*

Bill Moran presents his *Letterfishes* series, transforming traditional typography into a captivating visual language. Moran constructs intricate marine creatures using a creative assemblage of metal type, numbers, and punctuation marks. *"The privilege of making work for the Vatican Library allowed me to unite the past with the present by pairing my family's traditional printing equipment and vintage wood type to create new original LetterFish."* Bill recounts.

Fulvio Pierangelini explores the deep connection between water, cuisine, and memory through six original gastronomic narratives – written as culinary declarations of love for raw ingredients, crafted with reverence, expertise, and a touch of subtle irony. *"I am deeply honoured to contribute to this project and its accompanying agenda. In both, I share my own interpretation of the fish recipes discovered within a magnificent text preserved with infinite care and wisdom by this extraordinary library."* – Fulvio Pierangelini.

The exhibition journey concludes with a dedicated section highlighting the work of the Vatican Library's Conservation and Restoration Laboratory. Here, water reveals its final paradox: while a primary cause of physical decay, it is also an indispensable tool for the preservation and restoration of paper and parchment.

Curated by Don Giacomo Cardinali, Simona De Crescenzo, Francesca Giannetto, and Delio Proverbio, AQVA is more than an exhibition; it is the opening chapter of a major cultural initiative connecting diverse disciplines, eras, and artistic sensibilities. It offers audiences a profound reflection on the fragile balance between catastrophe and wonder, while contributing meaningfully to a deeper awareness of our relationship with the natural world – an issue rendered all the more pressing by the critical moment we are living through.

AQVA will be open to the public from 25 September 2026 to 14 May 2027 on Fridays and Saturdays according to a specific visitor schedule. Further ticketing and admission details will be released shortly.

Institutional Partners

The *Catastrophe and Wonder* project and the AQVA exhibition are made possible through an institutional partnership with **Fondazione Roma** and the support of **Intesa Sanpaolo**.



A three-year twinning agreement has been formalised between the Vatican Apostolic Library and Fondazione Roma, establishing a shared mission to preserve, restore, and promote cultural heritage. Special thanks are extended to Professor Franco Parasassi, President of Fondazione Roma, for his dedication to fostering this inter-institutional collaboration.

“Collaborating with such a prestigious cultural institution is for us a source of great pride, but above all an act of responsibility towards the wider community,” said Franco Parasassi, President of Fondazione Roma. *“Our three-year partnership with the Vatican Apostolic Library represents not only a union of excellence, but the realisation of a shared vision: to make artistic and cultural heritage a resource that is accessible, capable of inspiring, engaging in dialogue with the present, and encouraging deep reflection on our future. Through outstanding initiatives such as AQVA. Catastrophe and Wonder, we are firmly committed to advancing our shared mission as custodians and promoters of culture, so that it may continue to be an asset accessible to all.”*

AQVA also renews the Library's long-standing partnership with Intesa Sanpaolo, following their collaboration during the Jubilee year, confirming the institution's ongoing role in supporting the Vatican Library's major exhibition programming.

Stefano Lucchini states: *“For Intesa Sanpaolo, supporting a project such as ‘AQVA’ is a great honour. It means helping to bring an extraordinary heritage to life and make it accessible, fostering a dialogue between the memory preserved by the Vatican Apostolic Library and the languages of contemporary culture. It is a collaboration that fully reflects our commitment to culture, society and the environment as tools for knowledge. These are the great challenges of our time, as we seek to empower younger generations to look to the future with greater awareness.”*



Highlights on Display

DILUVIUM BY JR: The first site-specific art installation ever commissioned for the exterior of the Vatican Library. JR draws inspiration from Gustave Doré's iconic 1866 wood engraving of the Great Flood (featured in display via the rare 1870 Milanese edition by Treves). JR's towering wave captures both the awe-inspiring power of natural wonder and the devastating reality of catastrophe.

1966 FLORENCE FLOOD COMMEMORATION: Displayed at the top of the Library's grand staircase, a special installation marks the 60th anniversary of the catastrophic Arno river flood of 4 November 1966. Featuring archival enlarged photographs from an album presented to Pope Paul VI by the *Gieffe* photojournalistic agency, the display honors the tragedy that devastated the collections of the National Central Library of Florence.

AQUATILUM ANIMALIUM HISTORIA (1557): The centerpiece of the exhibition. Published at the Vatican Library's expense, Ippolito Salviani's masterwork stands as a monument of Renaissance typography, scientific rigour, and fine engraving. Salviani strictly documented species he observed firsthand, calling upon the Holy See's diplomatic corps to secure dried specimens and life-sized color illustrations across Europe.

WORKS BY BILL MORAN: 14 works (two on plexiglass, twelve hand-printed on paper) from Moran's *Letterfishes* series. Up close, these marine forms reveal themselves to be composed entirely of rearranged movable type, numerals, and punctuation.

THE TYPOTHECA VATICANA CABINET: Exhibited to the public for the first time, this original *A. Fouchier* type cabinet recently returned to the Library complete with its contents. Its 160 upper drawers once held copper matrices used to cast lead type, offering a tangible testament to the vast array of languages and alphabets printed by the Vatican Press over the centuries.

A GLOBAL CULINARY JOURNEY: A global survey of historic cookbooks from the Vatican vaults—spanning Europe, China, South America, Russia, and Japan—centered on seafood gastronomy. Notable highlights include one of the two oldest surviving manuscripts of Apicius's *De re coquinaria* (layout styled remarkably like a liturgical text) and a rare late-15th-century Song Dynasty Chinese cookbook, held in the Vatican archives since the mid-1500s.

LITERARY CONTRIBUTIONS BY FULVIO PIERANGELINI: Renowned chef Fulvio Pierangelini contributes six refined short stories written for the official 2027 Vatican Library Agenda (displayed within the exhibition). Combining poetic descriptions of zoological details with literary references and warm, comedic flair, Pierangelini's writings showcase a true literary talent.



Press Presentation of the Exhibition

On 14 September at 8:30 AM, accredited journalists and media operators are invited to attend the press presentation of the exhibition “AQVA. *Catastrophe and Wonder*” at the Vatican Apostolic Library. At the conclusion of the presentation, attendees will have the opportunity to witness the arrival of the Holy Father from the Belvedere Courtyard.

Following an initial presentation within the exhibition spaces, the following will be available for interviews: His Excellency Giovanni Cesare Pagazzi, Librarian and Archivist of the Holy Roman Church; Don Mauro Mantovani, Prefect of the Vatican Apostolic Library; Don Giacomo Cardinali, Vice Prefect and Commissioner of the Exhibition Spaces; the curators Simona De Crescenzo, Francesca Giannetto, and Delio Proverbio; the three artists JR, Bill Moran, and Fulvio Pierangelini; and, representing the partners, Dr Franco Parasassi, President of Fondazione Roma, and Dr Stefano Lucchini of Intesa Sanpaolo.

Accreditation and access

Journalists and media operators wishing to attend must submit their request at least 48 hours prior to the event, exclusively through the Holy See Press Office's online accreditation system at: press.vatican.va/accreditamenti.

Attendance will be granted subject to availability.

Accredited journalists and media operators are requested to arrive at 7:30 AM at the Holy See Press Office (Via della Conciliazione 54), where they will collect their accreditation badge and be escorted by Press Office staff to the event venue.

Link press kit: <https://cloud.vatlib.it/nextcloud/index.php/s/N3gr2PKYFqo4696>

About the Vatican Apostolic Library

The Vatican Apostolic Library is an ancient institution of research and preservation belonging directly to the Papacy, operating in close connection with the governance and ministry of the Holy See.

Tracing its origins to the papal *Scrinium* documented as early as the 4th century, the Library entered its modern era under Pope Nicholas V in the mid-15th century, who opened the papal book collections to scholars (“*pro communi doctorum virorum commodo*”, Papal Brief of 30 April 1451). Its institutional structure was formalized by Pope Sixtus IV with the Papal Bull *Ad decorem militantis Ecclesiae* on 15 June 1475.

For centuries, its vast collections—comprising manuscripts, archival records, early printed books, coins, medals, prints, drawings, maps, and photographs—have been accessible to qualified researchers worldwide without distinction of race, religion, origin, or culture. The Library specializes primarily in philological and historical disciplines, alongside extensive holdings in theology, law, and the sciences.