


How I Caught Pope Francis Sharing Fake News

Pope Francis is a pastor who loves telling stories. One of his most memorable is a vignette drawn from *To Every Man a Penny*, by the Scottish novelist Bruce Marshall.

A young officer in the Gestapo has been condemned to death by the French Resistance after the Germans have evacuated Paris. L'Abbé Gaston, a wise old priest, urges him to repent of his sins of the flesh. "How can I repent?" says the soldier. "It was something that I enjoyed, and if I had the chance I would do it again, even now." Then the priest has an inspiration, "But are you sorry that you are not sorry?" "Yes," responds the soldier, "I am sorry that I am not sorry."

"The door was opened just a crack," says Pope Francis in his book [The Name of God is Mercy](#), "allowing absolution to come in."

This anecdote sounded intriguing. Marshall was a prolific  Catholic novelist of a kind that flourished in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s – Graham Greene, Flannery O'Connor, J.F. Powers, Evelyn Waugh, or Myles Connolly. Long, long ago I remember enjoying *Father Malachy's Miracle*, one of his early novels, so I tried to get a copy of *Every Man a Penny*.

It wasn't easy. It was available on the internet from a Florida bookshop in for \$982.66, which seemed an exorbitant sum to satisfy my curiosity. I finally tracked it down in a university library, where it was on its way, I think, to being discarded. (A shame, really, for it deserves a contemporary readership; someone should republish it.)

I discovered two interesting things. First, the poignant incident cited by the Pope is not in the novel at all, but is a retelling of a similar scene. In its own unassuming way, it

is a species of fake news. And second, more importantly, it paints a portrait of the Pope's ideal priest.

I think that Pope Francis can be forgiven his error. He seems to have inherited the reworked anecdote from elsewhere and may never have read the book. The journalist who interviewed him for *The Name of God is Mercy*, Andrea Tornielli may not have read it either. As I discovered, it is difficult to check it against the original.

Besides, the anecdote is completely consistent with the theme of the novel, which is how God's mercy works through a simple priest. Though written in 1949, it is almost a catalogue of the Pope's favourite bugbears: rigid and unforgiving clergy, harsh confessors, "the calculated meannesses of the respectable", the rich who ignore the poor, and love of God without laughter. The protagonist, l'Abbé Jean Gaston, a poor, mostly humble, and not-very-talented priest in Paris is constantly reaching out to the margins; his best friend is a Communist and he shows kindness to the harlots who promenade across the street from his parish.

At the same time, he is a paragon of simple piety and self-sacrifice whose deepest yearnings are to say Mass and hear confessions. Without the slightest condescension, he feels a deep pity for the prostitutes who made Paris notorious in the early part of the last century. As l'Abbé Gaston reflects at another point in the novel, "the gospel of the Lord was a mercy and that it would be preached persuasively only by men who were merciful".

Before one of these women dies in childbirth, he hears her confession. "And try always to remember that the world is twice a cheat: it cheats you out of God and in the end it cheats you out of itself as well." It's the same advice that Pope Francis gives to the LGBT crowd who seem to have displaced the harlots of Paris as threats to Catholic morality: you will never be happy unless you observe the

Commandments.

Though published more than 60 years ago, there are passages in *Every Man a Penny* which have an uncanny relevance to the present pontificate. Although the main thread of the narrative traces l'Abbé Gaston from his days as a conscript stretcher-bearer in World War I to the end of World War II, Marshall interpolates anecdotes about the Cardinal of Paris, a devout but slightly eccentric cleric. One day he has a hilarious dream which reminds me of the wilder allegations made against Pope Francis by his Catholic critics:

"The Cardinal had a dream that the Pope had died and that a great American friend of his had been elected Sovereign Pontiff in his stead. The new Holy Father had chosen to reign under the somewhat unusual title of Buster the First and his first proclamation had been startling. From the chair of Peter, to the city and to the world, the new Pope had declared that all his predecessors had been wrong on an important doctrine of theology: free love was not a mortal sin but an immortal virtue. As a result of this declaration Christendom had been instantly united. Heretics and schismatics had abjured their errors. The Turkish nation had been converted in a body and Scotland had not been far behind. Russia had forsaken communism. Argentina, always devout, had sent three cruisers and a battleship to fire a salute of honour at the mouth of the Tiber. There had been a special display of fireworks at Port Said. The Cardinal felt that it was wrong of him to have dreamed this dream."

Reading *Every Man a Penny* made me wonder whether mercy and forgiveness still inspire novelists with a Christian slant. In the works of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, for instance, they recurred in novel after novel. The situation is different today, of course. In the 1930s Christians (in the main) felt united, sure of their message and self-confident, even if, as the novel points out, most people still blithely ignored God.

Today they feel under pressure, demoralised and even persecuted. Some respond with “the Benedict Option” of secession from “the world” or by aggressively challenging their foes. Could it be that there is no room for the mercy of God in the imagination of today’s novelists?

At one point, l’Abbé Gaston misquotes the obscure epitaph of an Elizabethan rake who tumbled from his horse and “brake his neck” to the great satisfaction of his more upright neighbours. Graham Greene refers to it several times in *Brighton Rock*:

*My friend, judge not me,
Thou seest I judge not thee:
Betwixt the stirrup and the ground,
Mercy I asked, mercy I found.*

That moment of unflinching clarity, that eternity in a moment, that moment known only to God and the novelist – could there be a more exciting theme?

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