

RELIGIONISTS

Pope Luke II awoke startled from a restless night the day after his ascension to the papacy by unanimous vote of the conclave of fasting cardinals who handed him a flue opener for the escaping column of white smoke. The humble bishop immediately took the papal name of one of Christ's lesser disciples. After blessing the faithful minions gathered in Vatican Square, he broke the fast with his brethren in the state dining hall of the Vatican with attendees including Cardinals Arevedecchi, head of the Vatican Bank, who was seated to his immediate right; Luigi Legalo, an expert in canonical and pedophilic law, who sat to his left; the eminent Bwana Straightpath of South Africa, a fundamentalist and church archivist; and seven retired and forty other Roman Catholic princes. Seated at the annexed table (a.k.a. the kids' table) were Msgr. John Stewart, chief of staff and first assistant to the pope, and an assortment of other bishops and monks. No women were present.

The Inaugural Menu

*Red wine with rice crackers in
a common golden chalice
(for the devotion to the Christ)
Bagels, lox, and cream cheese
(to pay homage to Jewish ancestry)
Caesar salad
(to honor the Vatican in Rome)
St. Peter's fish with angel hair pasta
(to pay homage to Catholic ancestry)
Assorted Italian figs and fruits
(fresh from the corner market)
Cognac and Cuban cigars
(a holy pairing)*

A roundtable discussion followed, wherein Cardinal Arevedecchi reported on the solvency of the Vatican Bank. As expected, its profit-making holdings were extremely liquid, as was its investment portfolio of 1 trillion euros. The annual stipend to each prince of the church for their personal use continued uninterrupted for over a thousand years. Worldwide, the church's outlier assets were less stable, principally due to heavy reserves for legal fees and settlements of pedophilic litigation when approved by Cardinal Legalo. It was agreed that consequent cash shortfalls were offset by reducing childhood education programs and aid to the poor or indigent rather than raid the personal funds forthcoming from the Vatican.

The archivist and fundamentalist Cardinal Straightpath of South Africa reported lay membership and contributions were uniformly declining throughout the world despite aggressive proselytizing for right-to-life, antigay, and misogynist church practices. He appeared genuinely confused. Overall, the financial condition of the Roman Catholic Church as a whole was precarious. This was principally due to millennia of escalating religious skirmishes, wars, and modern molestation scandals—the resolution of which often required large legal outlays and remedial compensation to victims. After this report, the breakfast was concluded.

The next order of business for the newly elected holy father was to place a conference call to his five favorite religious CEOs, hoping to get them to agree to a secret meeting to discuss the obstacles to religious peace—a consilato synod. His contemporaries for this call included the supreme mullah of Islam, the chief rabbi of Jerusalem, the bishop of Canterbury, the Dalai Lama, and the Russian Orthodox pope.

Ensnared alone in the grandiose office of the pontiff, he placed the conference call himself to each of their unpublished phone numbers, which he was privy to from his old friends, now his peers; and as he awaited the connections, he paced the spacious quarters while convincing himself that somewhere between a monastic cell and these grandiose quarters was a working office where he would be comfortable. Afterward, he looked into the modestly furnished Santa Marta guesthouse as his permanent office and residence.

While expecting a shrill ringing at any moment, he was, nonetheless, taken aback when he heard the peeling of bells as if coming from a steeple—*ding, dong, ding, dong*. It was indeed his phone ringing, modified long ago by Pius V to remind himself that whoever speaks here does so for the entire church. The conference call successfully gathered the participants on the line despite

interrupting their activities, whether it was another meeting, prayer, luncheon, or sleep.

His peers stood ready to take his call.

Luke's sense of euphoria when the idea to call first struck was now distilled into a slight trepidation. Silently he prayed none would be offended by his usurping upon their daily routine. He carefully lifted the gilded ceramic receiver revered by some of his predecessors while he spoke, "God bless you all for forgiving my abruptness, but I felt compelled to comport with you on this first day of my papacy because I need your help."

"Abrupt, *geschmut*, Luke, alas *iss forgessen*, and I wish you a mazel tov," said Moise, an old colleague and now chief rabbi of Jerusalem.

"Thank you, Moise, my dear friend. It will take some time for me to get my sea legs here at St. Peter's, and before they rope me in completely, I want to get our holy half dozen together for a private session, and don't worry, I'll pick up the tab this time," Luke laughingly said in broken Yiddish.

The fifteenth Dalai Lama, Patriarch Krill of the Russian Orthodox Church, and the supreme mullah—known amongst themselves as Abbruzu, Sabastian, and AliBaba, respectively—talked on top of one another.

"I'll bring the yak dish," said Abbruzu while Sabastian said, "I got the borscht!"

"I'll take care of the hookah and couscous," said AliBaba in broken English as they all cheered.

The bishop of Canterbury, an Elizabethan by birthright, hanging back to take in the banter among his religious peers and longtime friends, sneeringly decided on a more formal greeting to Luke. Aside from being an elder, he was a doctrinaire, and although he had a caring persona, he was often perceived as distant or shy. He found it difficult to let his hair down, so to speak, preferring to project a typical image of an Anglican pastor with a steel rod spine. He spoke in subdued tones with superb diction, “First of all, Luke, I want to congratulate and bless you as a fellow Christian and assure you of my devotion to your success, and bless my dear friends and peers for whom I pray every day. Nothing pleases me more than to join with you for a discussion. What is on your mind, Luke?”

Luke responded, “Thank you, all. I know you are as concerned as I about the escalating violence perpetrated in the name of religion. I ask you to join me in a consilato synod of peace to seek divine guidance to end this brutal side of religion. Together we can arrive at a pinnacle to lead our flocks in a universal prayer of petition so the Lord can shine his countenance upon humanity and grant us peace from the unintended consequences of our religious beliefs. Our world needs this now more than ever before.”

“Amen” was said in unison. They agreed to meet at a date and time to be decided.

THE MEDIA

Meanwhile, in the media world, international TV networks were agreeing to simulcast a debate among notable biblical scholars of major religions at a different time and place—a bibliophilic didactus.

Rather than label a public interest discussion about religion as a disputation, reformation, or proselytization, the major world TV networks opted for an informal roundtable discourse. Silvio Bertolani, the scion of the Italy news and entertainment network Ungatz, argued to narrow participation to converts only in order to titillate paying sponsors while enticing an educated and overindulgent consumer audience. Conrad White of BBC emphasized the need for formal and fixed rules of engagement. Manny Bloomberg of CNN sought to declare winners and losers at the end, as in a prizefight. The Australians, represented by Robert Murdoch of Fox, insisted on the option to polemically revise the tape before airing it to add innuendo and sensationalism to it. The attempted commercialization of this serious undertaking soon gave way to airing the views of biblical scholars for world peace. Lastly, Petro Poroshenko of Investia invited China, Japan, Africa, and India to join, at a time and place to be decided, with a program structure to be agreed upon.