

Progetto Manuzio



Vittorio Russo

Holiness!



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Holiness!

Vittorio Russo

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Holiness!

Note by Marcello Craveri

(writer and theologian)

Vittorio Russo has long been an enthusiastic writer about Christianity and approaches the subject with historical accuracy, as his first two works show. These works are: *Introduction to the Historical Jesus* (1977) and *The Historical Jesus* (1978), for which I wrote a lengthy introduction.

In his first two books, Russo painstakingly explores the figure of Christ as the preacher of a new religion. However, in this book he uses a different approach - the narrative form is an ironic and caustic dialogue between a recent pope who is not named and God Himself, who appears unexpectedly to His Holiness one night. The aim of His visit is to reproach His Holiness and all the popes who went before him for their errors, abuses, violence, persecution, inquisitions, holy wars and misdeeds committed in the name of God and Christ, not forgetting the lasciviousness of their scandalous lifestyle and the ill-gotten gains of the Vatican.

I have known the author for many years and always

thought he was an atheist, like myself. However, his indignation at the myriad misdeeds committed down the centuries by the various popes makes me think that Vittorio Russo has a naturally religious inclination. He appears to propound the ideals of social justice, believing in moral behaviour, the tenets of which are honesty, love for your neighbour, tolerance and forgiveness.

What makes this book a pleasure to read is the contrast between the gravity of a scandalised, disillusioned God and the apparent bonhomie of the pope (called *Holiness*) who barefacedly defends his conduct and that of his predecessors.

The dialogue is a well-balanced duel as both He and Holiness defend their own difficult positions, with subtle cuts and erudite thrusts keeping the reader on tenterhooks. The author stage-manages the confrontation, gradually raising the stakes and the tension, while maintaining a competent balancing act. The climax is an ingenious and unexpected dénouement, as I will let the readers discover for themselves!

Note by Adriana Valerio

(author, theologian, researcher in history of Christianity at
Naples University Federico II)

On first sight, Vittorio Russo's book may seem irreverent. However, the precision of the historical details, related in an imaginative yet caustic narrative, provides Catholics like myself with food for thought, stimulating critical reflection not only about the disconcerting aberrations of the past, but also of ecclesiastical institutions in our own age. We are encouraged to ponder calmly the need to look at the ideals expressed in the Gospel in a new light.

The premise must be agreed:
*“Is man only an error of God?
Or God an error of man”*

Friedrich Nietzsche

His Holiness had eaten badly and slept even worse. The dinner with the Patriarch of Jerusalem had gone on until late, and by the last glass of wine he was already experiencing the first signs of discomfort.

A weight, like a sharp stone, had moved around his stomach all night long. He had lain there with his hands pressed down on his belly, as bloated as a wineskin, and for hours had stared at his night light, down at the entrance, impassively standing guard over his discomfort - so unbecoming to His Holiness, so earthly. His eyes glowed like lanterns at that little distant light and flickered with sudden fear at the thought that he might have been poisoned. Since time immemorial, if a pope died suddenly it was put down to poison, though this was not always the case.

“Go on with you, you're imagining it!” He thought. “Those methods haven't been used at the Vatican for centuries. Admittedly, there was that recent case of the pope who died so suddenly and disconcertingly, and it has never really been cleared up, but it was hardly likely to have been poison. Things like that just don't happen these days.”

By dawn he finally managed to drop into a restless sleep. His muscles relaxed and his hands slipped from his stomach to lie calmly by his sides. What he experienced though was not the restorative sleep that follows bouts of pain, but a fuel-blown nightmare which even the most forgetful of people

would remember for ever. Because he had had a visitation from... the Eternal Father in person.

A religious man would have been flattered and happy. However, to the Pope religion was his career. As for practising it, that was quite another matter. Faith, which he deemed to be an instinctive manifestation, could have no truck with reason. And his reason, bolstered by erudition and years of theological study, would allow of no chink which faith could penetrate, and so enlighten the nooks and crannies of his conscience.

“What on earth am I thinking of?” He said defiantly. “How can I say: *It's the Holy Father!* if I don't even know Him? Accustomed to daily contact with the idea of God I see this apparition before me as Him. It's no more than... well... professional habit. That's quite clear!” He concluded triumphantly.

“There is no God. He doesn't exist. Man created Him solely to provide an answer to his doubts... this only justifies His validity and exculpates those who affirm that if *He did not exist one should invent Him*, since otherwise one would have to say, together with some *Christian atheist*, that if *He exists one must eliminate Him*.” And in the turbulent dream of his restless sleep, he dreamt. A dream within a dream, in a sense.

“Get away with you, how can one believe in the ridiculous

myths of the Bible: the Creation, the Flood...”

His stomach gurgled for an instant like the distant roll of thunder which announced that ancient event.

“Naïve stories, suitable for peasant folk,” he continued, after a hiccup to release the air which had been tightening his chest. “And then the patriarchs, the chosen people, the punishments of God, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah...”

He suddenly felt fire and brimstone searing the pit of his stomach.

“Of course,” he mused, touching his stomach on an impulse to ease the pain, “man has come a long way since then, even if the Church continues to preach that God manifested His infinite omnipotence in the Creation.”

As a child he had been fascinated by the story of divine omnipotence. On winter evenings he remembered his mother telling him about that extraordinary power, with total conviction, almost as if she herself had borne witness to it. And any questions about it all meant trouble!

“It really must be wonderful to be God...” he had naively dared to say. “When I'm grown up...” but he would stop. Her eyes would become burning coals, almost as if they were reading his heart. No questions were to be asked.

“You can't mess around with God!” She would announce crossly, as though someone was criticising her person and her

actions. “What on earth can you know about the mysteries of God?”

Whenever his mother mentioned the mysteries of God it meant she was avoiding his questions. He had learnt early on that when the *mysteries of God* were invoked it was better to back off. Because mystery, which may be a starting point for he who has faith, is most certainly the conclusion for he who has none. Faced with this impenetrable barrier he therefore preferred to keep quiet and accept the ritual punishment his mother meted out. She lost no time and everything obeyed the heavenly hierarchies: one hour kneeling for posing improper questions about God and Jesus, half an hour for asking about the Virgin Mary and the Saints. How many times as an adult had he invoked those mysteries himself and avoided embarrassment by stopping the mouths of the faithful!

Then there were his studies, his early discoveries and answers to queries. There were no certainties, though basically, God - like a magician's trick - was there, but invisible. He had come to the conclusion that certainties are the property of those who are besotted with faith, able to take in the most absurd of stories without batting an eyelid. Just like his mother.

“My goodness! What a marvellous thing faith is!” He reflected. “You can travel in time, space and *elsewhere* without any difficulty. You can believe in anything by dint of

elementary simplification. How reassuring simplicity is!”

And so he found himself running through the stages of the Creation...

Wednesday 23rd October in the year 4004, BC of course, at nine in the morning, if the calculations by that saint of a man J. Lightfoot are to be believed, God gave form to the darkness which filled the deep. Who knows how long His Spirit had inhabited that darkness before the idleness became too tedious! He divided the darkness from the light, then conceived the firmament, the earth and the sea. Pleased with His effort, because everything had worked out so well, He then created seedlings, grasses and fruit trees. And since these things had pleased Him too, He decided to go further and created lights in the heavens to illuminate the earth: the sun, the moon, and the stars... lots of stars...

Quite how many there were his churning stomach told him, but he thought on.

This was good, as was to be expected, so next he tried His hand at fish, birds, animals (nice tame ones) and reptiles. Because this was all so excellent, it was logical that He would now have to set Himself a really difficult task, like creating Man. This he achieved by forming man of the dust of the ground, breathing into his nostrils and... hey presto - producing a living soul.

Woman had required a rather more imaginative approach,

in keeping with feminine nature. However, that was clearly an off day, because He had only been able to express His male-dominated universe by means of complicated symbology. Issuing from Man and dependent on him, Eve had been made from one of Adam's ribs. God cannot have been very satisfied with the result because it is not written that He gloried in it, as He had done in His other creations. In effect, there was not much to glory in, given the disappointing behaviour of Man and Woman right from the word go...

The Pope was getting confused by so many cosmic errors...

“Let's get it right!” He admonished himself. “Trees and plants came before the sun, the earth was a flat island, the heavens were like a glass globe with stars stuck on like fixed lamps, working to preordained patterns: enough sun to light up the earth by day, and the moon by night. So: there was no conception of the boundless space that separates the earth from the infinity of other worlds? That space that telescopes monitor at a distance of millions of light-years and of whose infinite space only the threshold can be glimpsed. And Man? Ready-made. So there's certainly an abyss between the rudimentary *android* of millions of years ago and *Homo Sapiens...*”

He wondered just why he was having these thoughts now.

“Ah yes, the wine, that's it - the sacramental wine that Father Jacob recommended so warmly. Well, it certainly had

its effect... God is quite another thing from that simplistic image conveyed by the Holy Scriptures. The form in front of me is an apparition which causes no fear, it is a figment of my imagination, a creation of a mind impaired by an upset tummy. I could have done without this apparition, though! I was just beginning to feel better, thank God - I should say - and then... there He is, the Holy Father in person!”

From the depths of his dream within a dream he fell back into a restless sleep, and it pleased him to think that he had been put under a sort of spell - the *succubus* of an *incubus*.

Unfortunately not! God was right there in front of him: radiating light, from the equilateral triangle of a halo glowing round His head. He stood out clearly against the pale blue wall behind the enormous black cross which was painted in relief on the wall. That cross had been the brainchild of some zealous pontiff who had preceded him to the throne of Peter. And it was black, heavy and irritating. He hadn't the heart to have it removed, and it hung there like an obstinate threat, ready to detach itself from the wall and fall down on him at any moment.

Meanwhile the luminous shape was still there: an imposing figure, exactly as the artists of the Renaissance had depicted Him. He sported a thick white beard, arranged in orderly tresses like those on the Greek statues of Zeus and Poseidon. He smiled as he remembered the meticulousness of the rabbis

who had counted every single one of those tresses in the *Cabala*: one billion seven thousand of them, to be exact. In the meantime, from the centre of the light two judgmental eyes held him in a gaze from which he could not avert his eyes.

His Holiness feigned indifference.

“It's only a nightmare,” he told himself. “It'll disappear once the effect of the wine has worn off.”

But though he wouldn't admit it, he was terrified.

Then he saw that God had moved. He seemed to have left the wall and glided through the arms of the cross. Now He was coming forward, floating in the shadows the way He had hovered above the deep at the beginning of time. The pale blue wall had turned dark, darker than the skies in the paintings where He floats so gracefully.

“So it's true!” He realised, his heart in his mouth. “It really is God! He exists!”

Then he raked through his life, hunting for guilt and sins which He would certainly not condone. He sought in his pontificate for acts carried out in God's name, checking they were in accordance with the dogma of the Church.

He was racked by anxiety. For a moment he felt embarrassed and observed like a child at his first communion. But he couldn't find anything untoward.

“Yes,” he opined, “I have sometimes been stubborn or

overbearing, but only to stress the authority of the Church through he who represents it. In fact, I've nothing to worry about except for the main controversial issues like divorce, abortion, birth control, artificial insemination, *in vitro* fertilisation, the condition of women, homosexuality, violence, and so forth.”

He had always expressed his opinions forcefully. He had always been severe and dogmatic. In short, he had shown consistency and inflexibility in the best tradition of Catholicism. As for Galileo, well, he had had to rehabilitate him. The decision could not be put off any longer; it was simply not feasible that after four hundred or so years of silence the Church should continue to ignore the fact that the Earth turns around the Sun. So he felt everything was fine. He supposed if one really wanted to be nit-picking one could find a few peccadilloes here and there - items of scant importance... like the scandal of the Vatican Bank...

“Yes, the Vatican Bank, hypocritically known as the IOR, the Institute for Religious Works...” he reflected.

“...with a branch in the States... The official position of the Church had always been to condemn usury, so a change of direction was needed by the Church if the bank was to be recognised. Because the IOR, despite its name, like it or not, is a bank.”

For a moment he felt confused, then reasoned:

“The Church set up the IOR for good works, for moral reasons...” then he hesitated. “A bank with moral aims, though? The religious works of the IOR are nothing more than hot air, it's money they're after! And a lot of money! They even say it belongs to the Mafia! Religious Works indeed... Who knows if that is acceptable,” he wondered. He persevered unhappily.

“Of course, I liked that American cardinal who was less a man of the Church than a financier. But then the scandal broke and I had to crack down. So I sacked him without the least hesitation and sent him packing back to his prairies.”

He was then attacked by serious doubts about other affairs, more of state than religion, like the secret compromises made to destroy Communism. On the whole, there was nothing so dreadful in what he had done, the end fully justifying the means: it was a question of freeing oppressed peoples and lovingly escorting them back into the fold of the Church, he told himself sanctimoniously. However, he could not be easy, as though a fish bone was tickling the back of his throat.

If the truth be told, he was bewildered. He found some consolation in fibbing to himself that it was not easy to telescope one's existence into so short a span.

“What's more,” he added, as if apologising to his own conscience, “how can one talk to Someone who usually only gives orders. *My God!*” He went on, invoking Him in his

confusion, “how on earth can anyone say if I have acted as He would have wanted me to? What do I know of His wishes? How the devil can one know what He is thinking, when by definition His thoughts are inscrutable? What do I know about Him? Biblical descriptions of Him are so contradictory... He was merciless when He ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac in the land of Moriah and then relented, yet merciful when He forgave the murderer Cain for killing Abel, letting him off with a mark that was more a passport to impunity than a sign of notoriety. Well, it just isn't easy!” He reasoned lamely.

“Then, all of a sudden there He is in front of you and you know He is there. As if it were the easiest thing in the world. Tell me, how can you change the reasoning which has informed an entire existence in the twinkling of an eye. Good Lord!” He said inadvertently, “why didn't He appear before, with a gesture, a sign that might have given me a clue to His existence? I could have...” his thoughts wavered as he sought not to commit himself. “His manifestations are not exactly a daily event, are they? Has anyone actually *seen* His face, eh?”

He tried to remember.

“Unfortunately,” he recalled uneasily, “those He appeared to come to a sticky end. The whole lot of them. And that's a fact!” He acknowledged, after checking his knowledge of the Bible once more.

“The Old Testament is clear on this point. Horrible though it may seem you could be burnt to ashes for just having listened to His voice, while those who *actually saw His face* could expect an even worse fate. For *who is there of all flesh that hath heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire and lived?* It is written in Deuteronomy. The author of Judges lays it on even thicker: *We shall surely die, because we have seen God.* Even Moses, who had a good rapport with God and could speak to Him as *a man speaketh unto to his friend* could not see His face, because - as it is told in Exodus - *there shall no man see me and live.* Those to whom he deigned to manifest Himself had to cover their faces so as not to be struck down. That is what Elisha did, and he was privileged. Moses though, whether he had met Him several times and had grown used to it or whether his complexion was less delicate, could face His rays without covering himself. But he had to put the veil upon his face when he went back to his own people, because due to all the energy he had absorbed the people might get burnt merely by looking at him.”

He thought of Michelangelo’s version of *Moses* with those horns on his forehead; an unlikely account from Exodus says that when the liberator descended from Mount Horeb his forehead was illuminated by rays of light shining like horns...

He could have gone on recollecting, but that was enough.

“On the incendiary power of God,” he deduced “there is plenty of worrying evidence, whether it be for men, beasts or things, if it is true that through Moses again He ordered the Israelites to stay away from Horeb and stop their herds and flocks from grazing in the vicinity.”

He searched his mind again and grimaced, convinced by now there was little to be optimistic about.

“If that's how it was in the past, I don't see why things should have changed!” He decided.

“However, thinking carefully about it, once He did appear to someone without any awful consequences. It was Jacob, the patriarch. The story can be found in Chapter 32 of Genesis!” He recalled, with a sigh of relief.

“Jacob saw Him *face to face* - that's what it says - and wrestled with Him the whole night. While they wrestled he broke his thigh, but he survived! Very strange! ...I wonder why he was saved? And what does that story signify?” He ended lamely, as anxiety took hold of him.

In the midst of these reflections an unpleasant notion came to him: none of his thoughts would escape God. He really shouldn't have any doubts about omniscience especially after his mother's punishments.

“The tradition of the omniscience of the gods is a fixed feature of all religions,” he told himself. “The gods are omniscient by definition. They have to be, otherwise they

wouldn't be gods. Omniscience is their most important property, because it encompasses all the attributes of God.”

He tried not to think, since having such a poor opinion of God he could only have sinful thoughts. He was quite aware of them, and the more he thought about it, the more knew he was sinning. He suspected that his thoughts were an open book to His piercing eyes.

“Don't think. But how?” He mused.

And the more he tried not to think, the less he succeeded. It was like trying to cancel yourself out. Thoughts flew from his brain uncontrollably, like olives steeped in oil slipping off a fork.

Involuntarily he found himself, for the fifth time, raking through his knowledge of the Bible, trying to discover some distinctive trait of His that could be exploited for his own defence. There was no doubt whatsoever (this was a totally new experience for him) that the imposing apparition, which took up quite a large area of the room and hung in the air like a threatening cloud, was judging him and he was called upon to justify his actions. The gaze was so piercing it left him in no doubt at all.

“Sadly,” he conceded, “usually when God appears in the Bible it is to condemn and announce doom and destruction. I'll get round it by invoking His Son and His Mother... Then we'll see. Because it is really in Their name that I have acted.

Maybe I did exaggerate a bit about the Marian cult, and perhaps I did draw the attention of the faithful away from worshipping Him, but He's bound to know I meant well. And if he doesn't, what about all that mercy God is supposed to have?"

At that point light blazed from the triangular halo round God's head. Then God's thought became *The Word* and the sound was anything but pleasant:

"What has my mercy got to do with it?" The Voice vibrated.

It was only to be expected. God had obviously read the mind of His Holiness.

"First and foremost I'm a judge and a judge will never be sufficiently unbiased if he does not put aside his feelings. Mercy - if there should be any - comes later."

The Voice seemed to rise from the unplumbed recesses of outer space.

His Holiness felt he was sinking ever deeper into the cold coffin of his mattress. He lay lifeless, horror-stricken. Those words were like grave-stones toppling over and crushing him. That peevish Voice would allow of no doubt, and more importantly it did not augur well.

"Ah yes," he acknowledged. "It really is God's voice and is just the type of voice that the Eternal Father would have in the Old Testament: choleric and vindictive."

He had no choice but to listen and ponder what he heard.

What was so shocking was the language He used right from the start. His Holiness would never have imagined such a direct approach, which lacked the subtlety that after thousands of years of practice had been honed to a fine art by the Church. He was very uneasy. Here he was - the highest religious authority on earth! He, who was so used to the time-honoured tradition of veneration by millions of believers! He would have been offended if it hadn't been for the fact that *He was That He was*, and he would have had something to say about it - you could bet your life on it! But he was particularly annoyed when the Lord addressed him directly, without beating about the bush...

“*Holiness?* Where did you get that title from? You've been plying truths or half truths which neither I nor my Son have ever condoned!”

“Gracious Lord, Merciful Lord, Eternal Omnipotent and Immortal God...” squeaked His Holiness, searching desperately for some other laudatory epithet, but he was rudely interrupted.

“Let's get things straight, your *Holiness!*” Thundered God. “Cut out all this pomp and circumstance and let's get down to basics.”

“Right-o,” His Holiness ventured self-consciously. “What should I call Him? He hasn't told me!”

He knew what great mystery surrounded His name. This was an ancient tradition based on the idea that if you knew God's name you had a hold over Him. That's why He was so jealous of it and never told it to anyone. He had mysteriously informed Moses, His confidant in a manner of speaking, that He should be called: *I AM THAT I AM*.

“Now, if I am to address Him,” His Holiness pondered for a moment, “what do I call Him? *You art that You art?* It sounds impertinent! And it's far too long!” He decided, more disconsolate than ever.

“Just call me Eternal. The gods of Greek mythology were *immortal* and I don't want to be tarred with the same brush as them,” He said, perceiving the Pope's difficulty.

“Eternal or Immortal, what difference does it make?” Thought His Holiness, but persevered nonetheless.

“Eternal he started, trying to get used to that unusual title and to pronounce it with due reverence. “All I have done is to continue in the line of those who have preceded me on the throne of Peter...”

“Throne of Peter!” He exclaimed crossly, while the triangle glowing round His head sent out showers of sparks. “This is just another of the lies invented by the bishops of Rome. They knew everything about me and my Son... even things I don't know. But anyway, who appointed this Peter as head of what *you* call the church?”

“Eternal,” replied His Holiness, heartened by God's apparent forgetfulness, “it was Your Son himself. The investiture took place, as you will recall, on the road to Caesarea in Philip: *Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* Then he added: *I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* This speech by your Son is recounted in full in the Gospel according to St Matthew, chapter XVI verse 18... On this verse the Church is founded.”

Satisfied by this show of knowledge, he went into more detail:

“On the tambour of the cathedral of St Peter's these words are written in Latin, in letters six feet high, so that the eyes of the faithful of all the world can behold them...”

“I suppose you want me to compliment you on your good memory! Don't think for a moment I don't know what really happened. You forget that the verse from Matthew does not tell the whole tale! Don't be a hypocrite, *Holiness*, you know full well that right from the start your predecessors edited the Scriptures adding, inventing and forging information to justify the institution of the papacy. Do you know how many studies have been made, within the church and without, to give substance to that statement which is only from the first

gospel? An important point like this, to which you attribute the so-called investiture of Peter, would have been written of with much greater emphasis and in concert by all the evangelists and early Christian authors. Isn't that right? But in fact only Matthew speaks about it. The others say nothing. Mark, Luke, John, Paul even Peter himself say nothing, nor do the Fathers of the Church..." and he started to number them one by one on his fingertips: "Irenaeus, Polycarp, Eusebius, Cyprian, Origen," (He stopped because He had run out of fingers) "...and lots more..." he ended evasively. "No-one, and I mean no-one, knew that Peter was bishop of Rome or had ever been to Rome. In fact not even Peter himself knew about it."

"But tradition has it that St Peter governed this Church for twenty-five years. It is known that he died in Rome in 64 AD during Nero's persecution, after being cast into the Mamertine prison, and he was buried near the first milestone of the Via Cornelia on the site where thirty years later Pope Anacletus built a small oratory," His Holiness pointed out.

"This is a tradition set up by your church. Not by me or by history. No chronicle of the times has ever spoken of it. But that's not important. I don't need to explain the words of my Son, who knew how to say his mind. He meant *faith* when he spoke of the *rock*. It was Peter's *faith* that was called the rock, not his person.

“Anyway, if the Church - but the Church my Son meant - had a founder, it was my Son himself, not Peter. On this point all the Councils have agreed, from Nicaea in the 4th century to Constance in the 15th. Don't tell me you don't know that!”

He paused to reflect, then holding His Holiness in a penetrating gaze, He recommenced.

“Don't say you can't remember the words which Matthew said, that followed the so-called investiture. My Son told Peter to go to hell in a phrase which is the greatest condemnation of a man you say is the Vicar of Christ: *Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.* What else should Jesus have said, eh?”

His Holiness was aghast. He certainly knew the Scriptures well enough! Hardly surprising - He inspired them! Careful now, he had to watch what he said. Eternal was capable of incinerating him merely by raising His eyebrows.

“Well, I suppose St Peter was a bit stubborn,” he muttered, playing on His obvious dislike of the Galilean fisherman. “But if Your Son called him *Peter* it was deliberate... *Obduratio capitis*, he was not too bright was old Peter, was he? But if I may make so bold, on that occasion Jesus was a *weeny bit* strict with his First Apostle. In fact, very strict, if I may say so,” he ventured bravely. “But it's just my impression, take it or leave it. Though He did give him the

faculty of opening and closing, binding and loosing, and in my humble opinion that's a fact.”

“Get away with you! My Son gave His power to *all* His apostles indiscriminately. In one sense, but that is quite the opposite of the way your church has interpreted it. I don't intend justifying everything He did, because I would not have wanted any of them not even as vergers, but one thing is certain, and I'm sure you know this - the church has made a mockery of the meaning of His message and His deeds. It was done for no other reason than to justify boundless ambition and the thirst for temporal power.

“The people who you ask to believe in me cannot tolerate any more of your hypocrisy and I agree with them. By frightening people with stories of the eternal punishment I would hand out to those who do not worship me you have generated a society of suckers, a flock of sheep. Yes, that's right. And that's what you call them, isn't it? If I had needed to be worshipped I certainly wouldn't have chosen man - the least successful of my creations! If I had really wanted perpetual adoration I would have used dogs, because - as we well know - they are the most faithful of creatures. Not like sheep, eh?”

“Uhm... not really... well sort of... if You say so,” muttered His Holiness in a state of confusion. “But Eternal,” he added, seeking to appease, “I had nothing to do with those contrived

interpretations by the Church; it was all done long before my time.”

“Undoubtedly. You are no worse than the others: you did not open or close, nor did you bind or loose any more than the others. As a matter of fact, what pontiffs usually opened were coffers of gold from all corners of the earth, and what pontiffs usually bound were the necks of their poor victims, which were rarely loosed. You merely deemed it fitting to perpetuate this policy of ambiguity, which has lasted for twenty centuries. You did this in my name and you passed off as *holy* stratagems whose sole object was personal gain - which is anything but holy.

“I cannot forgive your hypocrisy. You are intelligent and know much more than the mass of simpletons you turn to, but you continue to lie just as the others did before you. By speaking of peace and love you betray those who listen to you. You, the authoritarian, denied freedom to Küng, Hunthausen, Curran, Boff, Sweeney, Schillebeeckx and Gaillot,” He was counting on five fingers again, adding an imaginary sixth and seventh digit “you denied the truth which is nourished above all by freedom...”

“Eternal,” His Holiness looked down averting his eyes, “if I may say so again, everything had been done by the time I got there...”

“Stop flogging this dead horse of *everything had already*

been done, will you? Don't tell me you would have liked to do something better but couldn't? If it comes to that, you *did* do something. Something worthy of note.” He said darkly.

“I'm sorry, I didn't make myself clear,” His Holiness apologised ingratiatingly. “I meant I only ever preached the eternal doctrine of the Church.”

“Eternal doctrine! And what might that be, pray?”

“Well... the adoration of the Virgin Mary, loving your neighbour, charity... You know, the eternal doctrines.”

“Adoration of the Virgin Mary! Loving your neighbour! Charity...!” He interrupted peevishly.

“What a cheek you've got! You seem to have forgotten that I know everything - not only what you think but what you don't think, before you even express it. You have only now acknowledged my existence and yet you think you can escape my omniscient mind...”

“Certainly not, Eternal. How could I, miserable creature of Yours that I am?” Parried His Holiness with indomitable hypocrisy.

“Ah yes, I was forgetting you are like all the rest. So corrupted by the perverted logic on which the church is founded to be virtually dead to the truth. You were alluding to the adoration of the Virgin Mary, pretending not to know how much the church has exaggerated and corrupted the meaning of the words which the Scriptures wrote about her. Needless

to say, for the sole purpose of inventing new topics for religious debate in order to condition the minds of the faithful. The accounts in the gospel about Mary are irrefutable. All I authorised to distinguish her was the label *blessed among women*, because she was chosen to give birth to my Son.”

“Eternal, with respect... it was necessary to have a female figure to enshrine the ideal prerequisites of woman, you know - modesty, chastity, grace...”

“The prerequisites which man *presumes* distinguish woman,” thundered The Voice.

“You, Eternal, if we have understood Your words correctly, set man above all things and above woman, whom You deemed to be a thing. There is evidence of this in the Tenth Commandment, inscribed in the stone by Your finger for Moses on Mount Horeb: *Thou shalt not desire thy neighbour's wife, nor shalt thou covet thy neighbour's house, his manservant, or his maidservant, his ox, or his ass, or any thing that is thy neighbour's*. I know this bit by heart.

“Woman is a chattel, but a step up from the ox and the ass. But still a *chattel* under man's orders, whether father, brothers or husband. So the ideal woman must be willing and humble. Paul confirmed this when he said that the man is the head of the woman, and that she was created in the image of man, and that women could not speak at gatherings, and so on. So it is

man whom you set at the centre of creation. You even have the semblance of a man...”

“This is one of the inscrutable mysteries of my mind that man cannot understand...”

“Another mystery...” His Holiness noted, but again he did not dwell on it.

“You see, You yourself say man...” he interrupted Him.

“Man as mankind, as a collective noun, part of a whole,” He muttered. “As far as woman is concerned, the incorrect interpretation of her person by your church caused all the aberrations of the Middle Ages. Female saints and witches are born of the same origin, deriving from one and the same phenomenon of ecstasy, which is both mystical and demoniacal. A fine thread binds them and the only difference is their loyalty: saints to me, witches to my Adversary.

“You still wonder if Joan of Arc was a witch because you burnt her as a witch in 1431, or a saint because you proclaimed her one in 1920. What differences do you think there really are between the witch Bellezza Orsini and St Catherine of Siena? The delirium of their mystic marriages, their feverish unions with my Son or Satan spring from the same manic hypersensitivity. *Columbae et striges*, doves and barn owls: saints as spotless as doves and witches as ugly as owls: both have experienced the ecstasy, whether spiritual or heretical...”

“What is He leading up to?” His Holiness wondered, and tried to appease Him by making suitable comments:

“Going back to those times to understand the mentality, aspirations, anxieties is well nigh impossible. What is certain though, is that the reason for such deviation must be sought in social conditioning, in ignorance, poverty, the dread of sin or transport of grace. Those were the origins of magic, spells, enchantments, sorcery, possession by the devil and mystic infatuation.

“Don't forget that this was a period when salt was used to protect people from the evil eye much more than for cooking. If saints and witches are both victims of conditioning and upbringing - which are often hysterical conditions, as is widely recognised - then tell me why the Church is responsible for this?”

The apparition paused for an instant to collect His thoughts, then answered:

“Those manifestations reflect the fact that the church, because of the morbid imagination of its inquisitors, set in stone the behaviour of a saint and a witch. These creatures are thus both victims of the same tortuous process set up by the church and are both worthy of compassion rather than veneration or condemnation. It is the church which, encouraging ignorance by using images of a vindictive God and a tempting Satan, contributed to spreading superstition...

It is the church again which set the trend of the mystical exhilaration of female saints and the prostration of witches, the *succubus* of the devilish *incubus*.”

“How on earth can one convince millions of Frenchmen and Italians that their patron saints are more worthy of compassion than veneration!” Thought His Holiness, but he went on regardless:

“As there was no central female figure in the New Testament, the Middle Ages fleshed out the rather sketchy image of the Virgin Mary. This was a good thing and can be justified because this historical period was very rough and ready. Courtly love and devotion blended and little by little came together to form the cult of the Virgin Mary. She became the ideal combination of humility and modesty that was supposed to typify the mediaeval lady. Thus it was only in an attempt to exalt woman, to *make her angelic*, as they used to say, that she was given the ideal image of Mary, woman *par excellence*, *Mea Domina*, who subsequently became the *Madonna* for all believers.”

“It is not up to you to justify things which only I can judge. And I can't justify them,” He decided. “First and foremost I will not pardon the tireless search for terms to flatter her, nor loading her with privileges and virtues which I never gave her...”

“Those privileges and virtues were for *consolation and*

supplication. They originated from the faith of simple people, and are expressions of a basic creed... old-fashioned ideas really..." said His Holiness, trying to make amends. He was more perky now, since nothing awful had happened yet.

"And what about those gross exaggerations of her role which followed, like *Queen of the Martyrs, Patriarchs and Saints, Queen of the Sea, of the Heavens* and other places besides, *Mystic Rose, Morning Star, Mother of Heaven, Most Prudent Virgin(!), Virgin of Virgins, Ivory Tower* and *Tower of David*? And your pictures of her! You depicted her as an Egyptian Isis breast-feeding her son, treading on serpents, crushing the world under her heel, without any restraint, with grotesque realism to the extent of seven daggers in her heart, usually silver ones on a black robe."

He scratched his head and went on:

"But why should I be surprised? You hung, drew and quartered my Son when you painted and sculpted Him with a bleeding heart or bristling with arrows like a porcupine. Without mentioning the praise, pilgrimages, feast-days and sanctuaries in honour of the Virgin Mary."

He paused again, then continued relentlessly:

"There are countless prayers to her and to the saints. The only prayers dedicated to me are *Our Father* (which was written by my Son) and St Francis' *Canticle* about the animals, which is a bit old by now. It is incredible how many

sanctuaries there are dedicated to Mary and churches to saints and martyrs I haven't even heard of. You even erected one to someone called St Castrese. This chap knew he didn't exist as a saint so he never had the courage to show his face in heaven. Not one little chapel has been set up in my name!”

“The Hebrews dedicated their temple in Jerusalem to You,” His Holiness corrected Him.

“The Hebrews!” He retorted indignantly. “The Temple was built by that black sheep Herod, who had the least Jewish blood in him of all Abraham's descendants... he was an Idumaeon of the odious line of Esau, whom I have never been able to bear. And what's more,” He said indignantly, “once it had been destroyed by Titus nothing was done about my Temple. All that is left is a bit of decaying wall where some kind Jews go to weep and pray, and risk being shot by some trigger-happy Philistine with a sub-machine gun...”

“You mean Palestinian,” His Holiness interjected.

“It makes no difference: same name, same race, same alms,” He growled.

He stopped for a moment, in a fit of rage.

“Let's leave well alone,” He suggested, when He had quietened down. “But I have to say there is no excuse for the excesses of the Middle Ages and still less for the excesses that followed, which opened the way to the dogma of the *Immaculate Conception*, the brainchild of one of your

predecessors Pius IX, then the *Assumption* (that was Pius XII) and finally *Mary Mother of the Church... Mary Co-Redeemer...* Who gave them permission?" This was no more than a rhetorical question as He got himself worked up again. "What effrontery... and it looks as though we haven't seen the end of such idiocy yet."

"Mary's properties are all in the same mould, Eternal. What's so bad about that? The importance of... Your Mother... has always been stressed."

"My mother?" He said, with huge eyes staring. "To be sure, you've even made her my mother!"

"Well, yes. The Council of Ephesus in 431 AD adopted the name *Theotokos* for the Virgin Mary, or *Deipara, Mother of God,*" His Holiness pointed out, whose language was rather technical by force of habit. "It was not dialectic alchemy on the part of the Council Fathers, but the fruit of consequential reasoning. The logic of it is extremely simple: if Mary is the Mother of Jesus and Jesus is God, then Mary is automatically Mother of God... Your Mother, in fact. This seems an entirely reasonable assumption," concluded His Holiness complacently.

"An equation! I am the result of your mathematical calculations, am I? You reckon that I would have made Mary - a human being with all the weaknesses of her kind - my own mother! A living creature before the Creator? You have

consistently misconstrued the issue and distorted my will. You have even corrupted the meaning of the words: Mary I intended to be full of grace, meaning comely in appearance, as the Greek word *kecharitoméne* signifies, and this was correctly used by the evangelists. But she has become full of heavenly graces for your lot, which I certainly never intended.

“And I shall not waste time on all the intricate theories invented by those learned men about the complex issue of Mary's virginity, on her *conceptio per aurem*, whereby the Holy Spirit entered through her ear, or the other no less ridiculous tale of the *conceptio per os*, whereby the Holy Spirit entered through her mouth. You have presumed to uncover mysteries and establish the truth by yourselves. You have distorted, added and mutilated the teaching of the evangelists who - at least as far as this issue is concerned - show evidence of learning from me and have sufficiently clear ideas. Yet my Son was unequivocal about His mother's position: He didn't spare her His criticisms when it was necessary.”

He thought for a moment then explained:

“Like at the wedding feast at Cana when He criticised her in front of all the guests. Another time, while He was preaching to the multitudes she came with His brethren to speak to Him. You will no doubt remember that with scant

regard for His family, He stretched out His hand towards the disciples and said: *This is my mother and my brethren. Whosoever does the will of my Father that is in heaven is my brother, my sister and my mother.* He was speaking of me, you will notice, not of His earthly mother. As for Mary, it's quite clear that she did not understand Jesus very well if - as Luke says - she was *astonished at His understanding.*”

“Yes, but concerning the brethren, it is well known that the ones quoted in the Gospel were in fact His cousins and half-brothers, because they were born of a previous marriage between Joseph and a sister of Mary's called Mary.”

“How prodigious!” He said sarcastically. “Joseph is supposed to have married a sister of Mary who incidentally was also called Mary. The truth is that this is nothing but deviousness on the part of the church, and can be put down to those two brilliant *gynaecologists* Ambrose and Augustin who claimed to know (which I didn't) that Mary was a virgin *before, during and after* the birth (hence, I suppose, *Most Prudent Virgin!*). You will not have forgotten that, I'm sure. Naturally, as the earthly brothers of Jesus were expressly called *sons of Mary* you invented the story about Joseph being previously married to another Mary, and after her death, marrying her sister, the Virgin Mary. What poor imagination!

“Paul wrote one indisputable truth: that my Son *was born*

of woman. I believe her role is clear, and the biological relationship between her and Jesus. There is firm evidence in the Gospel that Mary had other sons and daughters by Joseph, and that Jesus was only the firstborn. It is written that *Joseph knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son.* I do not need to explain to you the significance of the biblical *know*, or the difference between *firstborn and only son*, now do I?”

“I have always been opposed to the Marian doctrines,” explained His Holiness. “You know I have always disliked those repetitive clichés about Mary and those hundreds of meaningless *Ave Marias*, recited incessantly so the words lose any real sense. I have always opposed the rhetorical epithets about Mary and worshipping her as *Queen of Heaven, Heavenly Mother, Our Lady of Sorrows, Mary of the Seven Joys, Mother of all Grace*, and so on. I have always considered them to be *flatus vocis*, just hot air...”

“What? You dare say that? You forget that the Black Madonna of Jasna Gòra in Poland rose to prominence recently because you were behind it? For the benefit of your church, naturally. You forget that superstitious mass hysteria dubs as a miracle any blood issuing from plaster idols. Anyhow, history is full of weeping statues: Isis wept in Egypt, Juno and Minerva wept in Rome, and Lakshmi and Parvati continue to weep in India. The latter even has a holy

weep every month, as regular as clockwork.

“The Madonnas who weep are now so numerous that it is exceptional if they don't. The apparent caution exercised by your church about these phenomena, the desire not to condemn such irrational manifestations of faith, smacks of compliance and complicity. However, the truth is to be found in the true tears and blood shed by Jesus, not by dubious clay statues. It is precisely that premeditated silence by the church that propagates absurd beliefs and spawns unlikely *miracles* of weeping simulacrums of Madonnas. You forget that in Southern Italy alone over sixty different Madonnas are worshipped, not to mention those of Lourdes, Guadalupe, Aparecida, Fatima, Loreto, Syracuse, Medugorje, Grosseto and so on, with all their amazing graces.”

“Eternal, I have only given my seal of approval to an expanding cult; one which basically does no harm to anyone,” explained His Holiness.

“You don't think my role in all this has been overlooked at all? Me, the Creator, to whom everything is due.”

“But Eternal, the Church has established that it is You and Your Son only whom the faithful should worship; while Mary has a cult called *latria* and the saints and angels get something called *dulia*. However, it was deemed proper that Mary should be worshipped differently from *dulia* and *latria*, so it became *iperdulia*,” His Holiness carefully explained.

“That word has had a lot of success which can be put down to the mystic fervour of Paul VI.”

“Well yes, because he believed Mary had the right to special treatment,” His Holiness confirmed, pretending not to notice the sarcasm.

“Unfortunately it's just the latest fashion of your church, which is perpetually recycling clichés and definitions,” He retorted. Then He paused before saying: “Tell me, *Holiness*, how can a believer distinguish between *latria*, *dulia* and so on? How does he assess degrees of worship? *Adoration* for me, *iperdulia* for Mary, and common or garden *dulia* for the saints. In other words, you expect the poor old believer to know how much weight his prayer will carry, taking care not to exaggerate when he is praying to a saint, for example, because he risks adoring him and that would never do for a saint. I never endowed man with such powers.”

He stopped again, closed His eyes for an instant as if to concentrate, then continued:

“You speak of loving your neighbour. That is not what you have shown over two thousand years, when you persecuted and killed millions of Jews, my chosen people, or sponsored crusades to murder defenceless people, or to set up the Inquisition to torture and annihilate so many people that all the wars put together have caused fewer victims! And all in my name!”

“Eternal, those are past misdemeanours - errors which history has condemned. The Holy Inquisition has not existed for centuries...”

“Of course, history has condemned it, but not the church! As for your Holy Inquisition, it disappeared right enough but was soon back again, first called the Holy Office then some years later the Holy Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. Even if it does not burn heretics at the stake it still works behind the scenes and condemns. Therefore, it is not the church which acknowledges the errors of its ways, but mankind which has come to its senses and made other crimes and terrible errors of this kind impossible.

“Anyway, you cannot be so snide as to speak of charity and loving your neighbour. You have no more right to do so than those who preceded you, because you have shown very little of this charity and love. Maybe with words, or with blessings like *urbi et orbi* which cost nothing or with your usual Sunday sermon... But when it meant doing something, when you had to act, the church suppressed charity by pride and love by intolerance.

“From the day of the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, when Christianity was granted religious freedom, the church has done nothing but show intolerance and fanaticism. And yet no other document in the history of your church has been so liberal as that edict, which raised it up from the shadows of

the catacombs. Ironically, the edict was drawn up by a man totally lacking in morals and bloodthirsty to boot called Constantine the Great.”

“The love of orthodoxy of faith sometimes meant the Church had to stand firm. But myself, I have always shown understanding...” His Holiness ventured.

“So orthodoxy meant excommunicating those who did not pay Peter's pence or exterminating the Jews?” He interrupted.

“But the Jews, Eternal, killed Your Son. The Christian reaction was understandable.”

“And the church tried to take its revenge!”

“The Jews themselves knew that Christ's blessed blood would pour down on them...”

“You pretend you don't know how things went!” Said the Omnipotent impatiently, furrowing His imposing brow threateningly.

“My Son was not killed by the Jews but the Romans. If you read the Gospel carefully you will find clear evidence of this. It's ridiculous to attribute a crime to them which, even if they had wanted to they could never have committed seeing as they were subject to Rome and had no *ius gladii* - the right to pronounce sentences of capital punishment. My Son was crucified, and the crucifixion was a Roman torture. The Jews' conception of the death penalty - if they had been allowed to exercise it - was stoning and strangling, which was the

ancient custom. But you don't need me to tell you this.”

“It is true that Pontius Pilate condemned Him, but only when the people had opted to save Barabbas the thief rather than Jesus.”

“These are fairy tales, which your similars relate to the masses. You, *Holiness*, are a man of culture and you know full well that things went differently. Incidentally, don't forget the Romans took justice very seriously. So it would be absurd to claim that when Pilate issued his sentence he was swayed by the feelings or *decisions* (as you call them) of a hysterical crowd. What I don't hold with is that according to the laws of Rome, Jesus had only committed political offences. You know that my Son was rather sympathetic to those among His people who proposed that the Romans be driven out of Israel.

“As far as Barabbas is concerned, you might recall that he was not a *thief*, as you say, but a revolutionary, a *lestos* as John the Evangelist called him - someone who was armed and risked his life fighting in my name against the oppressors of his people. He was no ordinary criminal. What is also written in the Gospel (as you should know) is that under Roman law there was no way a guilty prisoner could be released in place of another equally guilty one.”

“But the Jews - all right, Barabbas was no doubt a special thief - but the Jews...” blustered His Holiness, “they hated Your Son. To see Him condemned they accused Him of

blaspheming and told Pilate...” he added naively while his thoughts wandered.

“Just imagine how much Pilate and the Romans cared about anyone blaspheming against me! They had illusions of grandeur those people, a thirst for power and to pursue those ends they needed good brains and legions, not me” He pronounced. “I do not intend to justify the Jews, because they certainly caused me a lot of problems, but if the Jews - all of them - had killed my Son, according to you, this would have authorised the church to persecute them for centuries and segregate them in ghettos, where those who stuck their noses out after curfew were virtually committing suicide! You are so hypocritical that nowadays you join in accusing a bloodthirsty devil like Hitler.”

“Ah, the Church has always disapproved of him,” His Holiness observed sententiously.

“Really? Your silence in the past I feel rather justified such actions. Perhaps this is because basically you approved of the fact that he was trying to take revenge for the death of my Son. You did of course acknowledge his intentions of doing to my people in one fell swoop what you did to them for two thousand years.

“As for charity, which you also refer to, what you preach is selfishness. I wanted my Son to be born in a stable to be a model of poverty. I wanted Him to be underprivileged, so that

He would not even have a tunic to his name. It was not even His garment that He was wearing which the Romans soldiers tore from Him and drew lots for when they hung Him on the cross. I wanted Him to die on the cross, as naked as the meanest of slaves...”

“If this was Your wish, why reprove *me* for Your decision? The legionnaires drew lots for it, whether it was His or not, because it belonged to them under a specific Roman law called the *lex pannicularia*,” His Holiness elucidated punctiliously.

The Eternal Father's glance swept over His Holiness disapprovingly, from his head cushioned by a pillow with a fancy border, to the edge of the blanket covering his feet. Then He continued, without deigning to comment.

“The thrust of my Son's message was humility. This, of all His teachings, was the one which has most often been ignored by your church, even spurned, from its foundation to the present day...”

“Eternal,” hazarded His Holiness, embarrassed by His pause, “You know to what extent a pope has his hands tied, how much he is a victim of history and tradition, a prisoner of the Curia and the system. Every gesture is carefully observed. His behaviour is ordered by strict rules. It's not easy to be as slippery as an eel when a thousand traps are set for you. I cannot say what I think. Before opening my mouth I have to

consider what those who have preceded me have said, be it a year or fifteen hundred years ago. I must weigh my words with care, so that the Church and religion are not harmed.”

“You are victims of your own machinations,” He rebuked.

“Only so that the Church does not make mistakes,” blustered His Holiness. “Serious mistakes, I mean,” he added, noticing that He was frowning. Then he continued:

“You know how difficult it is to defend the dignity of Your name. It is hard indeed for poor shoulders like mine to carry such a burden,” he said, peering into the darkness at the Shape. “The Church has always preached humility,” he risked.

“You have made the church an exemplary monument to human pride and on your lips the word humility smacks of blasphemy!” He thundered. “You preach humility in abstract terms - in appearance - not in substance. With brass-faced presumption you have expected people to kiss your feet, placed upon a velvet cushion bordered in gold and you have had yourself paraded around in your *sedia gestatoria*, dressed up to the nines like some emperor, glistening with rare jewels and ermine, flattered and fanned by a flabellus like the Pharaohs. You don't even find it absurd, because you want everyone to know how powerful and important you are. I pale into insignificance beside you! My poor Son would have refused any earthly title. His kingdom - He always used to say

- was not of this world. Who has ever followed His example, except for that seraphic, poor devil St Francis of Assisi?"

"If we had followed closely in the footsteps of Your Son, by being poor, humble and charitable, if the Church had continued to aspire to the kingdom of heaven, the Church would not have got very far and perhaps today Your name and Christ's would both be forgotten. As for the pomp and ceremony, You know such customs have been abolished. As for me, I humbly anoint the feet of my cardinals every Easter."

"An empty gesture!" He retorted "Humility means restraint. How restrained is your gesture if it is given the maximum publicity, becoming a soap-opera on the television, photographed by the tabloid press and commented on only so as to tell everyone that His Holiness, the Supreme Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ -because for centuries now you have been calling yourselves Vicars of Christ not of Peter..."

"But Eternal," His Holiness interrupted, "if the pope is the Vicar of St Peter and St Peter is the Vicar of Christ, then the pope must be the Vicar of Christ, mustn't he?"

"And my vicar too! Without any respect for me. With such representation I have lost face in my own eyes. I denounce the logic of transitive property, the logic of deduction - the logic of pontiffs like Innocent III, who in 1203 dared to say: *We are not the Vicar of Peter; not of any other apostle. We*

are the Vicar of Christ, before whom every knee shall bend
This is the height of arrogance!”

“But some years later Innocent promoted the crusade against the Albigensians and canonised Peter of Castelnau who had been murdered by them...”

“He exterminated the Albigensians, you mean. In their thousands showing no mercy... and taking no account of my clemency. As for your Castelnau, he has never been up to see *me*, because he knew too well that I never approved of Innocent's rascally decision.”

“But St Peter of Castelnau excommunicated Raymond of Toulouse because he supported the Albigensians and they were heretics, Eternal; they preached that the body is despicable, they refused the sacraments...”

“Above all, they hated the corruption of the church of Rome, which had become *a den of vice*, and of its leader, whom they considered the incarnation of the devil himself.”

“They preached that You were a malevolent God, the origin of materialism, the source of all evil. They taught that sex was evil, marriage was wicked, a pregnant woman was possessed by Satan and even that suicide was virtuous... it was not to be tolerated! Would you have been indifferent to the insults levelled at You?”

“And what solution did your lot choose?” He raged giving His Holiness one of his dire looks. “Destruction and death! In

the year 1209 the leader of a punitive expedition - Arnold of Citeaux, paid by Innocent's indulgences - this Arnold and his band of bloodthirsty rebels broke into the churches of Béziers and even into the cathedral. They cut the throats of defenceless people, then hacked them to pieces when they took refuge behind the altar. The town was reduced to a heap of rubble and that brave leader boasted of the fact that twenty thousand citizens had been slaughtered, regardless of *age or sex*. The quick and the dead, indeed. All that was quick by the end of the day was the lime poured over the bodies.

“No less wicked was Montfort who finished the job off. At Lavaur four hundred people were burnt at the stake on one huge bonfire. All together. Innocent thanked both these gentlemen and myself, of course, for the clemency shown in the purification of these two heroes. The extermination went on for almost twenty years. Hundreds of thousands of people were burnt alive, and their only crime was not to pay tribute to the pope.”

“There are always rogue elements in military operations, and there's no doubt, awful things were done at that time. However, heresy has always been punished with fire, since time immemorial, according to Your laws. It was necessary to make an example so that such a dreadful cult would not harm the true faith. A forceful example, granted, and there were many of them.”

“Yes, because those heretics were so hardened in their sins and so blind that they refused the clemency of the sword offered by the church. In fact they threw themselves into the flames of their own free will, so as not to be touched by the hands of their persecutors. Just think, they thought their hands were soiled!” He commented sarcastically.

Then God became serious again.

“Persecutions by the Romans caused so much martyrdom that your church had a calendar full. And yet, in one fell swoop, Innocent succeeded in making more martyrs than the whole of the Roman persecutions put together. But let’s proceed,” He said, changing tack indignantly. “What humility is there, I was asking, in a grandiose gesture like that of a pope kneeling down and symbolically washing his inferiors’ feet? This is no humility, it’s a farce. You carry out this rite solely for it to be seen and talked about. My Son preached that humility and charity should not be ostentatious. But what did your church do? Your church was about as inconspicuous as a scarecrow and threatened interdiction, anathema and excommunication to all those who would not bow down to it.”

God's anger was clearly mounting because His words were burning with indignation, his expression was fierce and even the triangular halo was white hot.

“Who would have ever thought,” He remarked “that the

words of an ignorant fisherman from Bethsaida called Peter and that dreamer of my Son would have generated such temporal power, which terrorised the world for centuries! My Son was born in a stable and had nowhere to lay His head. You, His *vicar*, live in a palace of ten thousand rooms (not counting your summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, which even has a swimming-pool! My Son had nothing but the water he washed Himself in, and just once running water - when he was baptised in the River Jordan. My Son told people to sell their possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, but for centuries you have done nothing but accumulate secular riches.”

“Eternal, that image serves to honour Your name and make You even more glorious...” His Holiness said eagerly.

“My glory has no need of such images. My creation testifies to my glory. Why not admit that pomp and ceremony serve to hoodwink the faithful, to confuse them, and arouse their admiration and awe. But awe of your pride is not the same as respect for my name. You are just like your predecessors: a disdainful king wallowing in pagan riches. You can't even perceive the irony of it: dressed in glittering costumes you dare to preach charity and humility to the underprivileged. As someone once said: *One can bow his head to the ground before you, but for fear of your power not respect for your probity*, and I say, if the cap fits, wear it!

“My Son was mockingly called *King of the Jews*, and for hundreds of years you have been kings of the earth. In fact, you still call yourself *Your Grace, Holy Father, Your Excellency, Beatitude, Your Holiness, Most Reverend, Most Holy, Your Eminence*, and so on.”

“Those are merely forms of ceremonial address. Does Your representative and your Son's not deserve them? Are you not proud of them?”

The apparition ignored the pope, and carried on regardless.

“Your cardinals, gleaming and solemn like herons, once favoured a hedonistic and licentious court life; they dressed up like ancient satraps, trailing the fringes of their purple cloaks behind them (they're a bit shorter today) and puffed out their cheeks under that red hat. Are these gentlemen, and you too, my servants, the representatives of my poor Son who died on the Cross? Some wonder by what arcane means and tortuous machinations Golgotha and the Vatican have been brought together. I wonder how, too... And to add insult to injury you declare you are infallible.”

“The pontiff is only infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra*,” pointed out His Holiness.

“Of course, as if the pontiff was working to a schedule. what he does outside working hours is no business of the boss... and that's me! A limited liability appointment!”

“But Eternal, this dogma has ancient origins...”

“Infallibility to popes means the sins, vices and crimes you have continually soiled the earth with. Infallible is used to describe atheist popes like yourself, simoniacs, sadists, libertines, priests married with children, murderers, poisoners, sodomites, heretics, followers of Satan, fornicators and mass murderers. And what about all those popes who were poisoned, stabbed, who drowned, died of VD or were strangled in their beds with their lovers,” He went on heatedly, counting them off on the fingers of both hands, which did not suffice. “And those whose blood, or the blood that they shed and poured into the Tiber, which for centuries was an open cess-pit, as bad as the Ganges!”

“Well, some popes were not really up to it, I suppose...”

“Some popes? Just some of them?”

“No doubt You are going to accuse me of the awful things Boniface VIII and Alexander VI did... Crimes of arrogance and simony... But You have to take the times in which these men lived into consideration...”

“Boniface VIII had a lot of faults,” He replied after a brief pause, “but the worst of all was to have lived. As for arrogance, he not only gave form to it but face as well. It shone through his words, which are the banner of the church: *We declare, announce and decree that it is necessary that every living creature be subject to the pontiff of Rome if he is to be saved.* That's what he said. He meant that they could be

saved *from him*, and only by blind obedience. He could not have been referring to any kind of salvation, because he knew nothing of it. He devoted his entire existence to this theme.

“It was said that he was all eyes and ears, since the rest was rotten. And how right they were! Sad to say his foul face and even fouler mind were involuntarily the expression of the exact opposite of my omnipotence. Boniface was furiously opposed to the hateful Colonna family, the heirs of the Counts of Tusculum, who considered the papacy their family heirloom. Boniface merrily razed their fortress at Palestrina to the ground, killing over five thousand people in the process. However, Sciarra Colonna inadvertently did me a favour when he took his revenge. After beating Boniface up, he threw him into prison. There he died, biting himself to death, like some rabid dog. In fact it was just as that weakling Celestine V, who had been pushed out of office by Boniface, had predicted.”

“Granted Boniface was no saint, but it was really Dante who was responsible for his reputation as a reprobate: he branded him a simoniac while he was still alive, relegating him to the Eighth Circle of hell.”

“I couldn't have done better myself. I left him there just where the poet put him - stuck upside down in the rock, so that no-one should ever see his foul face again.

“As for Alexander VI, or should I say Rodrigo Borgia,” He

went on punctiliously, “he was, in a way, a man of faith in that once he showed it without any hypocrisy. It was when his son Juan Duke of Gandía, was assassinated out of blind rage; the body, as was usual, was thrown in the Tiber. Alexander wept for days on end and begged me to pardon the murderer, as he quite clearly could not.”

“Yet he resolved to restore the church, and he was a devout worshipper of the Virgin Mary...” His Holiness chipped in.

“Yes, but he was weak. He forgot his pious resolution as soon as he'd made it. As for the Virgin, he had her painted to look like Giulia Farnese, the girl he had cradle-snatched, who became his lover. That's all I know about him that's good; all the rest is despicable.

“He made an early start: at twelve he committed his first murder. As an adolescent he was depraved. He was graciously made cardinal at twenty-four by his uncle, Pope Callixtus III. He became pope after rigging the votes. It cost him three hundred thousand gold ducats to bribe Giuliano della Rovere, who tried everything under the sun to get him deposed and waited in trepidation for Alexander to die, so that he could take over, shortly after as Julius II. Cardinal Savelli was given Civita Castellana and the bishopric of Majorca. Cardinal Orsini received the see and ecclesiastic revenues of Cartagena, in addition to the government of the Marches. Cardinal Sforza didn't do too badly either, seeing as

he cast the decisive vote: four mules loaded with silver, the Castle of Nepi and Palazzo Borgia in Rome. Not to mention the abbeys and monasteries, and other high privileges which Alexander had promised to all the cardinals with *nephews* to provide for. But this was small beer, because soon after he began to hand out entire continents to the kings of Spain and Portugal.

“So it's not surprising that in Rome they used to say at the time that I was no longer Father Almighty, but Father Christmas!”

“Eternal, I beg You: one must judge events from a historical perspective. Alexander should be seen in the context of the habits (or rather bad habits) of the period.” His Holiness ventured, trying to get him off the hook. “He was very orthodox, but was completely absorbed by the lascivious habits of the times. How can one expect holiness from a man who no doubt aspired to it, but certainly had not the time or inclination to indulge such an aspiration?”

“He was a very determined ruler and wanted to make his state the most powerful on earth, though some said that *pater nosters are not the stuff of powerful states*, which Alexander VI knew only too well. In order to achieve such aims Christian charity had no place in Alexander's methods, thus he was seen more as a temporal prince. He was not the worst on record, though he did employ the cunning, skulduggery

and ruthlessness of the basest of them.”

Grimacing, He shook His head disapprovingly and carried on regardless:

“Once elected pope, Alexander wished to thank me for having so kindly inspired the cardinals in their choice. The investiture ceremony was spoiled by looting and pillaging and hundreds of murders, which was nothing unusual at the time. It was celebrated with saturnalia and parties of such worldly splendour that the following remark was voiced (which was sheer adulation and sacrilege) - *if Rome was as great under Caesar, under Alexander it was even greater because if Caesar was a man, Alexander was a god.*

“It is not clear how many children were fathered by this pope - he probably didn't even know himself. However, among them was the notorious Lucrezia Borgia, whom he considered daughter, wife and daughter-in-law, as she granted her *favours* (as they say euphemistically) to Alexander, and also her brothers Juan and Cesare. He also fathered poor old Goffredo, who had to marry the capricious Sancha of Aragon for state reasons. She was the heir to the throne of the Kingdom of Naples and was the object of Alexander's morbid lust, frequently ending up in the bed of her brothers-in-law.”

But God hadn't done with Alexander yet.

“He had a marked propensity for *nepotism*. There was room for everyone on board his ship of state, and because of

his passion for the blond Giulia Farnese, he saw no reason not to bestow a *galero* (a cardinal's hat) on her brother, who was subsequently known as *Cardinal Petticoat* and became pope with the name of Paul III. Orsino Orsini, Giulia Farnese's squinting husband, was handsomely rewarded with church money, and happily turned his sound eye to his wife's relationship with the pope.

“Alexander had boundless ambition, a trait which his son Cesare inherited, in addition to a passion for poison of the *cantarella* type, the cicada. He dished it out generously, like holy water and in massive doses, so the outcome would be quite certain.”

“Many historians say that there is no real evidence that Alexander poisoned anyone,” His Holiness interjected.

“Alexander may have tricked historians by concealing his murders, but he certainly didn't pull the wool over my eyes!” He retorted, and without pausing continued:

“He used poison mainly to get rid of those cardinals whose positions had been bought from him. In this way he put the post up for grabs several times over. *Vendit Alexander claves, altaria, Christum*, it was said, meaning he sold the lot: altars, Peter's keys and Christ himself. So it was easy for him to have large reserves of money to finance Cesare's wars. He did not do anything more... but only because he didn't have time.

“It has been written that he *was the most sinister*

incarnation of paganism ever to have been a pope. But this is an exaggeration, because - incredible though it may seem - some were even more despicable. No, Boniface and Alexander and many others from that period were as good as gold in comparison to their predecessors.”

“In the darkest of Middle Ages...” volunteered His Holiness, who had a gut feeling about what was coming next, but got no further.

“How many crimes, how many atrocities have been committed and ordered in my name or my Son's! How many deaths in the name of a hypocritical peace!” He continued, following the same leitmotif, practically ticking off one by one the darkest episodes of ecclesiastical history.

“How much wickedness has been committed against humanity for the vainglory of the bishops of Rome! The story of humanity is soaked in innocent blood shed by the victims of Peter's vicars. The papacy itself was baptised with blood at the massacre of the followers of Ursino, who was hacked to pieces by the supporters of Damascus in 366. It was then that the famous quotation from Matthew became the theological justification for the power of the Roman pontiff. There followed bloody battles to set up this or that bishop, or to establish one group's authority over another's. Two, three or even four popes were elected at the same time by different factions, each driven exclusively by the thirst for power and

resolute hatred. One against the other, one more determined than the next, a fight to the death, family against family...”

“Your Son had foreseen this when He said that He had not come *to bring peace, but a sword, and to turn a man against his father and a daughter against her mother...*”

“Unfortunately what Jesus said has been distorted,” He explained patiently. Then He added:

“...brother against brother... battles in which I and my Son always came off worst, barring those who were killed, of course. This was the history of the church for the first eight hundred years of its existence. There was even a female prostitute who was bishop of Rome - the notorious Pope Joan, also known by the name of John Anglicus, who died in childbirth while she was being carried on her gestatorial chair to the church of St Clement...”

“But Eternal... there has always been prostitution...”

“I suppose I should have turned a blind eye, should I? When it was going on in my house? I should have smothered all my pride, no doubt!”

“I mean prostitution in general. There were many religions where sex (it was called *ierodulia*) was considered a holy act and even lucrative. What I meant was that concerning Pope Joan, it is well known that this is nothing but a mediaeval wives' tale!” His Holiness blustered.

“What others do in their religions is no interest of mine.

You say it was a mediaeval wives' tale? You forget then that to stop that kind of thing it was deemed necessary to build a chair with a hole in the middle of the seat, so that newly elected popes could be *examined!* There was one such throne in red marble kept at St John Lateran until recently.”

“Nobody examined *me*,” His Holiness pointed out, “but if You say they used to do it, then I suppose I’ll have to believe it!” He added, rather disgruntled.

“And then,” He went on, “for over a century each new pope was worse than his predecessor. Quite how dreadful Lucifer could be was only discovered when Stephen VII, son of a priest, was made pope in 896. He had the effrontery to exhume the body of Pope Formosus and set up what became known as the *cadaver synod*. Formosus was guilty, according to Stephen, of having usurped the throne of Peter because he was bishop of another city and therefore could not be bishop of Rome too. Stephen forgot that he himself was bishop of Anagni and thus guilty of the same crime.

“Formosus had been dead about eight months, but that did not stop Stephen from acting out the farce of having the rotting corpse dressed in full pontifical regalia, carried into court, tried and sentenced. Stephen then had him thrown into the Tiber after amputating the three fingers from his right hand used to give the blessing. Some honest fishermen found the body and gave it a decent burial. Stephen committed so

many atrocities that he was eventually strangled in prison.”

“It was Your... divine punishment,” His Holiness remarked to himself, but out loud he said only: “dark times!” as he lacked inspiration.

Without deigning to even look at him, He proceeded.

“Dreadful times indeed. However, the times of Alberic of the Counts of Tusculum were the worst of all. The Alberic family was evil through and through, and I never managed to wipe them out: the devils who were not in hell at the time were all born into their family. There were a dozen or so popes, three anti-popes and forty odd cardinals among them. In the tenth century, which has been nicknamed *papal pornocracy*, there was unbridled lust. Power was wielded by courtesans like Theodora and her daughters, though the most depraved of all was a woman called Marozia.

“The pope at that time was John X, Theodora's lover, who ended up suffocated by Marozia. From 904 to 911, Pope Sergius III had been the lover of Marozia, who was not yet sixteen. Sergius had had Christopher, his predecessor and son of Pope Leo V, murdered in prison. Moreover, he also had what was left of Formosus' corpse exhumed again for another trial! Poor old Formosus was sentenced for the second time to be thrown into the Tiber. This time though, they cut off his head and the few remaining fingers.”

“Ah, but the chronicler got muddled between Stephen and

Sergius - it only happened once. That's the long and short of it," His Holiness amended.

"So according to you, Sergius should be a saint?" He asked sarcastically. Then he continued: "There was John XI, son of that ghastly Sergius III and Marozia. He became pope at twenty in 935 AD, but fortunately for all concerned, his papacy did not last long, because he was imprisoned by his half-brother Alberic. This Alberic saw fit to get rid of that monster of a mother of his - Marozia the prostitute, by incarcerating her alive in Castel Sant'Angelo and leaving her there to rot for fifty years.

"After that came Alberic's son, Pope John XII, who in 955 AD, became pope at just sixteen! To list all his evil deeds and unmentionable sins would tire me out. Unmentionable sins indeed... in fact it seemed not even hell could contain him."

"Sergius III and John XII were nothing but lads. You have to understand this - high-spirited, you know... boys will be boys and all that. Too tight a rein only causes problems later on. But what did this John do that was so unmentionable?" Asked His Holiness, who pretended he had forgotten.

"You reckon the church should be run by lads, then? The church founded by my Son? *Holiness*, this is no joking matter. Me, the laughing stock of young lads? Maybe my Son would, who is so used to *sacrifices*, but to make a mockery of me - that's going too far. Have some respect for this grey-

beard! What *can* you be thinking of?

“John soiled his hands with all the crimes you could possibly think of - he was the epitome of crime!” He sighed, and then listed them:

“He had incestuous relations with his mother. He kept what can only be described as a harem at the Lateran Palace. He rewarded his courtesans with silver caskets and chalices from the Vatican treasure-house. He owned thousands of the best thoroughbreds, which he fed on almonds and figs soaked in expensive wine. He gambled with the alms taken from pilgrims. His blasphemy was proverbial, his greatest amusement being to toast Satan and Venus at the altar. He usually consecrated deacons in the stables. He was killed with a blow to the neck, clubbed to death by a jealous husband, while in bed with the man's wife...”

“Clubbed to death?” Asked His Holiness, intrigued.

“One blow was enough,” He assured him, and went on. “He was twenty-four and so dissolute that the women of Rome avoided going to St John's in order not to ruin their reputation. It appears he was one of the few popes that died in his bed, or rather *another* man's bed...”

“No doubt this was just juvenile horseplay! Should I forgive a man who courted the devil and yet was supposed to represent my Son! What notion could he have had of my holy family? In what hands had my reputation been placed?”

“Eternal, there can be no doubt as to the despicable deeds carried out by John XII, but often when records are few and far between it is easy for rumours to get exaggerated and become established as historical fact. How many biased chroniclers have slung mud at people who were in fact quite respectable!” His Holiness ventured, accusing and condoning at the same time.

“Rumours? That devil respectable?” He growled angrily. “For your information, the chronicles of the time do provide evidence, even though Liutprand had his own axe to grind. Some said that John XII was so evil that the people begged me with tears in their eyes to get rid of him. And out of pity for them, I agreed to in the end.”

“Where there's a will...” thought His Holiness.

But He pretended not to notice and kept on.

“Those who said he was evil had no way of knowing what would come next, though.”

“This John though - he took the Word to the Magyars, to glorify Your name. He also made Dunstan, the Archbishop of Canterbury, a saint.”

This insignificant detail made Him raise his eyebrows and give His Holiness a very dirty look.

“Your Dunstan is small beer, and as such he doesn't deserve a place in paradise serenaded by my angels!” He muttered, before continuing his sermon.

“Things were just as bad under John XIII, son of a bishop. He had half the population of Rome murdered, but before he could finish the job he was chained up in Castel Sant'Angelo. He only managed to survive thanks to the good offices of Otto, the emperor of Saxony. He certainly didn't get any help from me, I can tell you.”

“That biased old Liutprand expressed himself in very forceful terms about him,” His Holiness objected. “Just think - John XIII lived in one of the most turbulent periods of the 10th century. His good works included aiding the development of monastic life. And it was he who started to convert the Poles...”

“Heaven waves no flags. I judge once and my word goes.” He sentenced, His words as weighty as grave-stones.

“Yes, and I can imagine what the result was!” His Holiness surmised, while He continued to blast away.

“There was a pope called Boniface VII who had Benedict VI strangled in prison, in 974, and himself proclaimed pope. After deflowering a young girl he fled to Constantinople with the Vatican treasures. He only came back to Rome when he had squandered it all, but he ended up with multiple stab wounds in a sewer. And guess what? He had been found in bed with his lover. Boniface VII alone did so much harm to Christianity that Satan sat there scratching his horns and feeling useless. That holy man of the church Gerbert called

him the *most evil of monsters*, but unfortunately not even he could foresee what was going to happen next.”

After a pause He went on.

“Another admirable defender of the faith was Gregory V, son of Otto of Carinthia and cousin of Emperor Otto III. He was twenty-three when he was proclaimed pope in 996 and Otto became emperor at just fifteen. They consecrated each other, as often happened at the time, and each justified the other's evil deeds. Then the pope had to flee from Rome because the whole population was up in arms about his crimes. He was poisoned at the age of twenty-seven and his cousin, the emperor was twenty-two when he died. The only good thing Gregory ever did was to have the abominable Marozia killed off, who had managed to survive in prison to the ripe old age of ninety-four.”

“Gregory did have one redeeming quality,” suggested His Holiness.

“And what might that be?” He asked sarcastically, irritated that some minute detail might have slipped his memory.

“He made Erluin Archbishop of Cambrai and suspended many bishops who were neglecting their duties.”

“Are you suggesting that I should have suspended Gregory? Well, maybe you're right, because he always confused duty and free will. He should have been *suspended*, of course... and from a very high gallows too! As for your

obscure Erluin, I put him at the back of the class. I suppose you think I should have pardoned Gregory because he made Erluin archbishop?”

“Good Lord...”

“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain!” He interrupted crossly.

“It’s just an exclamation, Eternal,” explained His Holiness. “I was saying Good Lord, pardon is a bit of an exaggeration... Erluin was a poor dev...” he stopped himself just in time. “Lord, you aren't actually asking my opinion?”

“Of course not! I decreed hell fire and hell fire it is to be!” Was His fiery response.

But the story had to go on.

“...all ecclesiastical preferments were obtained through money and treachery. This system was frequently used by Benedict VIII and his brother John XIX, both popes from the Alberic family of Tusculum.”

His expression was forbidding, and when He started to speak it was in hollow tones.

“Of the same family was that fiend Benedict IX. When he was proclaimed pope in 1032 he was just nine years old. *Right from the beginning of his pontificate that evil being behaved in the most abominable way,* as that devout man Peter Damian recalls. After only a few years as pope Benedict had already blotted his copybook, even outdoing his

predecessors. He was Old Nick himself, the Prince of Darkness, arrayed in pontifical robes. He lived the most abjectly dissolute life one can possibly imagine, indulging in the most despicable of vices. Lots of people tried to get rid of him because of the murders and crimes he committed, but he always managed to cheat death and find shelter in the castles of his native Tusculum. During one such absence Silvester III was proclaimed pope in his stead, but Benedict fought his way back to the throne.

“Then he decided to abdicate. He had become infatuated with a cousin of his, and her father Gerhard of Saxo gave his consent to their wedding on condition Benedict abdicated. His cousin persuaded him, so he did. Still more convincing was a certain John Graziano who bought the papacy from him. Graziano, simony made man, became pope with the name Gregory VI.”

“He was a devout Christian, though,” His Holiness piped up.

“The sign of the cross with which he signed ecclesiastical documents does not prove he was a good Christian, merely that he was illiterate. The only thing he had in common with the humble origins of Christianity was the fact that he was totally uneducated, like the Galilean fishermen who befriended my Son. But I haven't finished with Benedict yet. His absence from Rome was protracted. Having killed off a

couple of popes, who had been set up by opposing factions, he reclaimed his apostleship. However, he was eventually kicked out by the emperor's soldiers and disappeared from the scene.”

“In fact, after his *alienatio mentis* phase he turned over a new leaf and canonised Simon, a monk from Syracuse,” interrupted His Holiness in an attempt to redress the balance. “By the end of his life he was attending every possible mass, had become a follower of St Nilus and retired to the monastery of Grottaferrata to devote his life to prayer...”

“This is about as credible as Pilate reciting the Creed. As far as I’m concerned he never addressed those prayers to me. Maybe they were meant for Satan, his companion in gluttony. Simply because of his retreat, do you think I should seat him alongside the VIPs in heaven? Would you let someone like that in *your* house?”

“Well... er... maybe not, but You are merciful and forgive seventy times seven over...”

“The only good thing that disgusting individual did was to die and descend into hell, but as usual it fell to me to sort him out, and I left it a bit late. Anyway, he's down there now, and there he stays. I don't think eternity will last long enough to punish him seventy multiplied by seventy thousand times!”

He decreed, merciless rather than merciful.

“I have no intention of trying to change Your mind,

Eternal, but I have to say they were terrible times. Times of great uncertainty for the Church. It was thrown off the straight and narrow by the thirst for temporal power, and was victim of human greed and the evil influence of great families, who were only interested in wealth and power. St Paul says that *money is the root of all evil* in his *First Epistle to Timothy*, but as the saying goes - any port in a storm... And that's always been true.”

“Authority and the thirst for power were always the aims of the church until 1870. It took the cannon shots of Porta Pia and Cadorna's *bersaglieri* to stop Pius IX pursuing his *libido dominandi*, the thirst for power he inherited from his predecessors; having lost this, he decided to become infallible instead.”

“But the Church has never lost its sense of mission, even amidst such trials and tribulations...”

“Naturally. This it achieved by forging alliances with the most powerful rulers of the earth and requesting military aid to defeat their enemies, who would become allies sooner or later. This was the mission supported by popes who were ready to declare war, to lead armies, fight armed to the teeth, seek out treachery and set rulers one against another. The destinies of whole races were in the hands of power-crazy individuals who didn't give a fig for the suffering they caused...”

“The aim of war was to restore peace,” remarked His Holiness cautiously.

Two tell-tale lines, synonymous with grief, appeared on His face and He sighed bitterly.

“The abuse of quite absolute power was the most enduring crime committed by the church. And it is all the more serious because that power originated from He who had no power at all in His lifetime,” He murmured sorrowfully.

“In Your name,” His Holiness threw in, trying to divert Him towards less painful topics, “the Church laid down strict rules which brought earthly princes to their knees - those proud sovereigns who would otherwise have dealt with You as they wished. The first to champion Your cause was Hildebrand of Soana, Pope Gregory VII, who fought to prohibit lay investiture. He proclaimed the principle of *Libertas Ecclesiae* and endeavoured to make ecclesiastical appointments dependent on *anulum et baculum* and not on the *sceptrum...*”

Oh what had he said? His face took on an ugly look again, while He persevered with His tireless tirade.

“That sickly individual Gregory VII, a fan of Gregory VI who signed his name with a cross instead of a signature, and passed off his illiteracy as a sign of faith, distinguished himself, during his pontificate, from 1073 to 1085, for no other good reason than an even greater inflexibility, though

he accepted compromises with the lay authorities, like all the other bishops of Rome. The only difference was the ruler: instead of the Saxon and Frankish kings he entertained relations with the lords of Tuscany and Southern Italy.

“His objective was the supremacy of the pope and he fought with all possible means for it to be recognised. So he was an envoy for himself, not for me. He handed out excommunications like lashings. He humiliated Henry IV at Canossa and excommunicated him on three further occasions. He twice excommunicated Robert Guiscard and once Boleslaus of Poland. But it would take far too long to list all the princes and bishops he excommunicated. He financed punitive expeditions against temporal rulers, stirred up subjects against their masters, cursed whole peoples and cities, fulminating everyone who didn't agree with him, until his supremacy was recognised by all.”

He stopped for a moment and shut His eyes while He drew a deep breath. His Holiness took advantage of this pause to try and patch things up.

“Gregory had to tackle treacherous enemies in a fight to the death for the victory of the Church, so that it did not become an instrument in the hands of the empire, cunning princes, ferocious feudal lords and a corrupt schismatic clergy. Rome was twice conquered by Henry IV and the Temple of Peter was desecrated. Gregory was deposed

several times but owing to his strong allegiance to his faith, his steadfast hatred of flattery and subterfuge, the Church was saved, and with it the name of Christ.

“He loved justice and hated guilt, as he said on his death bed. He came to a sad end and left the world with a message of faith in the spiritual values which had informed his existence.”

“Hah! You do not say that his struggles were marked by the most terrible violence, fires, devastation, interminable sieges followed by rapes, bloody massacres and epidemics! So this is how you see Gregory defending the name of Christ, is it? It was not against Christ that the Christian Henry IV fought, but against a dictatorial pope. By excommunicating the emperor, the bishop of Rome automatically released the people from their oath of allegiance and triggered a civil war. The lives of common people were clearly of great value to the pope! The Norman hordes, called in by Gregory, came rushing to his aid and saved him - nobody else mark you - from the fury of the emperor.

“After sacking Rome and reducing it to a heap of rubble, slaughtering the defenceless inhabitants who did not support the pope, and desecrating the altars, these same hordes then turned on each other when deciding how the booty should be shared out, and more fighting was necessary to separate them.”

His voice growled like a thunderstorm as He piled on the agony.

“After all that death and destruction Gregory is the saviour of Christ, is he? Try to remember - and I see you need to - that Christ died on the Cross, and Gregory in his bed of old age. Christ was crucified to redeem the sins of the world, while Gregory fought for his own glory and he sacrificed nothing but poor victims, unaware of his plots, on the altar of his pride. Thus Gregory's service to Christ is nothing more than lip-service. And you dare to claim he had an extremely pious nature, when it was nothing but presumption and ruthlessness!

“The twenty-seven articles of Gregory's *Dictatus Papae* are the culmination of his stubborn pride: *Only the pope in Rome is universal..., only he can use the imperial insignia..., only he can depose emperors..., nobody has authority to judge the pope..., the Church has never erred and shall never err to the end of time..., only the Church can release subjects from their oath of allegiance to a sovereign..., the pope is undoubtedly a saint...*

“Evil has always been alien to my nature, even if Gregory said that I inspired these atrocities. No doubt he did decree that the appointment of bishops and their deposition should be ratified by the *Fisherman's Ring* and *Peter's Crozier* and no more by a king's sceptre, as you say. But this was only so

he could surround himself with his favourites, people he could use to control the temporal kingdoms he coveted everywhere, sometimes by legal means but never legitimate ones, from Corsica to Hungary, from Dalmatia to Spain.

“Gregory pursued his aims fiercely, imposing obedience with an arrogance that was totally un-Christian. He bent kings to his tyrannical will by forcing them on their knees at his feet to plead for mercy and pity, and then and only then - with cunning diplomacy and hypocritical generosity - did he deign to withdraw his excommunication and grant a Christian pardon.

“Gregory's legacy is nothing but irremediable material and spiritual destruction. And after so much infamy you made him a saint, thinking I might not notice. But he had me to reckon with, and I assure you his reckoning was way out. For ten centuries I have kept an eye on him - a man of such ambition and arrogance is dangerous on earth, in heaven or wherever.”

He finally drew a deep breath after this long tirade.

Now it was His Holiness' turn:

“Under Gregory though the Church became strong again. The authoritarian principles which he is accused of were the widespread principles of the time. Gregory was successful in defending a spiritual concept and the Christian cause, against a vision of lay supremacy in a world opposed to his beliefs.”

“I don't perceive anything spiritual in that!” He retorted. “Were these the laws of charity and humility that the Church had embraced? Not a bit of it. It was his sheer pride triumphing over others' sheer pride. May I remind you that the only kingdom my Son ever preached was the kingdom of heaven - *my* kingdom. The principles that Gregory vaunted were the ones which inspired the Church ever after, without any internal reform taking place. This was in order to strengthen his ambitions, subject man to his arrogance, brand with infamy and mercilessly persecute all those who did not perceive my hand in all this blood-thirsty alienation. Simony continued to run riot like all the other forms of vice, even though they were officially condemned.”

He stopped for a moment to straighten His triangular halo with both His hands before ploughing on regardless.

“Sixtus IV had fifteen male relatives to help along the way, which he did by handing out left, right and centre preferments and cardinalships, which was a despicable way of trafficking in sacred things. He had no idea how to save money, but he had an ingenious one about how to make a lot of it. He was in grave need of funds because of the disgusting prodigality and orgies practised by all his kinsmen. He thought that the notion of purgatory would be an excellent way of making a pile of money. You know perfectly well that I never created it...”

“Maybe not, but purgatory is necessary, I assure You. It is

a transitional state of atonement for sins committed. Venial sins, of course, from which one can gain remission with temporary punishments. What sense would Your justice have if crime were not followed by punishment? St Thomas teaches that while *petty crime* is atoned for after death, one must come to terms with *punishment* in purgatory. The usefulness of intercession on behalf of the deceased was underlined by the Councils of Lyons in 1274 and Florence in 1439. They acknowledged that charitable works by the living atoned for the dead. Through such works souls were able to get their sentences reduced...” His Holiness dutifully explained.

“I never set up any sort of purgatory and I did not inspire any of the doctrines which you speak of,” He complained. “I spoke only of grace. Salvation through my grace, granted to those who believe in me. *Today shalt thou be with me in paradise!* Were my Son's words to Dysmas, one of the two men crucified alongside Him. I have never felt like breaking that promise, I can assure you.”

He continued:

“Sixtus decided that the souls of the damned should be freed through money, and they could shorten their stay in purgatory if they handed it over. Shortening their stay doesn't mean much though, when the length of the sentence is not known. It means a specific reduction in time subtracted from

an unknown quantity. This ignorance of the duration of the sentence obliged the living to pay up continually. Such was Sixtus' diabolical brainwave.

“There were people who pointed out at the time that he was a ruthless and infamous individual because he could free a soul from the fires of purgatory, but would not do so unless he received his pound of flesh. Moreover, Sixtus decided that I should become his faithful guardian in purgatory, ready to jump to attention and release or assist those who had paid their due for freedom.”

“Well, notwithstanding all that,” parried His Holiness, “he was a real defender of the faith, because in 1482 he ratified the condemnation of heresy.”

“Yes, thank you for reminding me about that vile institution that was the Inquisition,” was His cutting riposte.

“However, the Inquisition was not evil in itself: in fact it was set up to *fight* evil. It was born of the need to defend the purity of faith through pre-empting and supposedly suppressing the actions of heretics.”

“However, the history of the church and the Inquisition are inextricably linked. The inspiration was the anti-Christian behaviour of some of the Roman emperors. Soon after the catacombs were shut the church lost no time in behaving aggressively like the Romans in the name of truths that were nothing more than hot air. The church gradually perfected the

methods it used to carry out its policy of repression, and during the Third Lateran Council in 1179 it was ruled that fighting heresy was just, as it preserved *faith*.

“This was little more than a smokescreen to conceal the fact that it was left to countless zealots - usually Dominicans assisted by laymen - to safeguard the interests of the pope. In 1483 alone, the year he took office, the Grand Inquisitor of Spain, Thomas of Torquemada, condemned seventeen thousand people to death, two thousand of whom were burnt at the stake. This atrocity caused so many victims that I still haven't managed to count them all, starting from the first few thousand in Andalusia, where innocent and guilty alike were tortured and slaughtered...”

“Jesus had predicted that tares would be sown among the wheat.”

“He was certainly not referring to that horrific atrocity. My Son died for all mankind and it pleased Sixtus to return the favour by killing off a few people on the way. He *wallowed in crime up to his mitre*, it was said of this pope by a man who had enough nous to know what was what. An extraordinary concentrate of human wickedness, I had Sixtus in my little black book long before that - though I must admit I was a bit lax about him” He candidly confessed.

“How I would like to erase from the history of time the excesses which led to the aberrations of the Inquisition!” He

exclaimed, torn between pity and impartiality. Clearly, the countless atrocities were taking their toll on Him and forcing Him to remember.

“It's all set in stone up here!” He exclaimed, slapping His vast forehead with His palm, making the room vibrate. His halo shook while a furious stare pierced His Holiness' very soul. “Those who caused these massacres shall be called to account on the Day of Judgement, and I'll burn them to ashes for eternity!” He solemnly promised.

His Holiness had a go at balancing the books: “The fight against heresy was perceived by the Church as its most important duty - one which all good Catholics should carry out. The inquisitors invoked Your name and Your Son's name during their actions and thanked Him by chanting the *Te Deum!* Though they were incredibly bigoted they believed they were showing Him their devotion by getting rid of those devil-worshipping heretics.”

“You mean by making sacrifices to propitiate Jesus! Blasphemy!” He raged. “The custom of human sacrifices has been abandoned as a practice in my family. My Son had nothing to do with this abomination practised by Christians, which was passed off as fighting heresy! No! That was no fair fight - it was persecution, repression, extinction...” the crime escalated as He grew more heated.

“Your church's action was the most heinous of crimes

against humanity a crime that began in 1231, the year when Gregory IX gave his seal of approve to the Inquisition, and gradually grew and spread like a festering sore. But worse was to come when Innocent IV issued his bull *Ad Extirpanda* in 1252, which advocated torture to extract confessions from their victims. Never before had people used my name for such deviant behaviour. How can I forget - even at my most indulgent - the frenzied fanaticism of the Spanish Dominican friars against Elvira del Campo, eh?"

Sadly His Holiness had to admit it: "I seem to remember that unfortunate episode."

"In 1568 in Toledo," He went on, His voice little more than a sigh, so moved was He by those unhappy recollections, "she was put on trial for heresy. That poor girl was accused of sympathising with the Jews."

"She was of Jewish stock..." His Holiness countered, then tried to put things right by adding, "I know that's no excuse but..."

"She was Jewish only because she didn't eat pork and used to change her linen on Saturdays! My Son was a Jew too, and He preferred fish to meat. Your church, which tortured Him in a thousand different ways, did not do it because of the food He ate. Just think - that girl was subjected to torture by water: she had to swallow gallons of the stuff, drop by drop, through a plug of fabric rammed down her throat until she almost died

of suffocation...”

“And yet the court acknowledged that the poor girl was innocent after all...”

“Yes, after humiliating her and treating her like some wild beast, and stripping her down until she was barely decent; after destroying her personality and robbing her of her dignity; after continuing to torture her when she cried for mercy for her *crimes*.

“Tell me, what should I do about all those crimes against humanity? Real crimes! Elvira had already been locked away in prison by the Inquisition for a year and she was then sentenced to imprisonment for three more years. She had to wear the yellow cross of shame on her clothes, which served to identify those condemned by the Inquisition. Last but not least, she was deprived of all her worldly goods. It was common practice for victims of the Inquisition to lose all their possessions which would be shared out among the inquisitors, pen-pushers, spies, hangmen and naturally, the pope himself. Which was precisely what happened at the foot of the Cross,” He added.

A long pause followed, gloomier than dead of night.

“The Inquisition was not a cruel institution,” His Holiness suggested cautiously, “if You look at it in perspective. The period was rife with phobias, fear and paranoia. It was the terror of not doing Your will that made the inquisitors so

zealous. I cannot condone the folly which drives fanaticism but, in their way, the inquisitors were devout. Pitiless of course, but for Your sake. Bigoted rather than guilty, they were moved by a mistaken sense of orthodoxy.”

“For my sake, indeed!” He repeated. “I would really prefer to be hated if deeds committed for my sake cause such suffering! It was not for my sake at all, it was sheer bigotry by fanatics who could not see that what they were doing had no other purpose than to strengthen the pope's hold over the people.”

“It was to You that the inquisitors attributed the annihilation of heretics, not to their bigotry. You said nothing, accepting their praise, frankincense and myrrh, thanksgiving masses...”

“So, I should have done something about it, should I? And you rebuke me for not doing so? If I had intervened, I would have had to reduce the world to a heap of rubble with rotting corpses about every five minutes!”

“Then You could have built a better world! Maybe you would have been more careful, so as to avoid unpleasant surprises. It wouldn't have cost You anything! You create second-rate human beings and then You complain because things aren't quite ship-shape!”

“So I should have been checked out, should I? If I failed my exam I would have to re-sit it like some schoolboy! I'll

have you know that what I create is sacred, unrepeatable and final.”

“...like Paganini, who never repeated himself!” His Holiness quipped mentally. Then he replied:

“Well, You did intervene sometimes... what about the Flood? Or Your tricks with fire?”

For a moment or two He pondered, but when He spoke again He made no reference to His Holiness' insolent remark.

“The Inquisition is not cruel only if you think of it in its historical context, but it certainly is if you compare it to earlier times. In fact, the majority of European countries considered torture a relic of evil from a bygone age. The very principle upon which the Inquisition was founded was inhumane and impious; inhumane in that it sometimes lasted for years, nay decades, and even corpses were tortured! Inhumane again because those who spoke of the clergy or the pope were tried, even if they had uttered those words when drunk. Heresy was nothing more than forgetting to celebrate Easter, eating meat on a Friday, reading the Bible, not paying church tithes or merely being suspected of heretical attitudes.

“These offences were punished inexorably and sentences could not be appealed against. In any case, what appeal could there be against a sentence passed by an infallible institution like the church, in whose name the Inquisition acted! It would have been absurd to give credence to a heretic, because he

opposed the Inquisition on principle. This procedure was ratified in about 1100 by Pope Paschal II.

“None of the dozens of popes who sat on the throne of Peter, from the 11th century onwards, ever disapproved of the methods used by the Inquisition. It never even crossed their minds that my Son, though innocent, had been condemned to death because the Jews considered Him a heretic.”

“Unfortunately,” His Holiness chipped in, “an institution which down the centuries has built up the notion of infallibility cannot refute its doctrines, though they may be seen to require radical changes in the light of the evolution of thought. As it cannot refute them nor repudiate any of the decisions made by previous popes, the Church can only try to forget that they exist.”

“What you mean is that the church preferred to grind the Gospels into the ground, rather than retract any of its blasphemous bulls.”

“And yet it is true of the Church that *non novit sanguinem*, it has never shed blood” His Holiness quibbled, “because those who were condemned were invariably handed over to the lay authorities, with a plea for pardon on the part of the inquisitors.”

“Those fanatical judges were quite unexceptionable on the face of it. However, you know perfectly well that no lay authority ever granted a pardon. They were bloodthirsty, but

not daft. Granting a pardon would have been tantamount to putting themselves in the hands of the inquisitors to be charged with heresy or sympathising with heretics. They would possibly have been tried by the same hypocritical judges.

“This is the most shining example of sanctimonious perversity that I have ever come across. Moreover, temporal rulers were in the habit of being even stricter than the church suggested, so as to show their devotion and profit by it. Those rulers were undoubtedly murderers, but less so than the popes who egged them on. Those popes passed off suffering as necessary for salvation, achieving it by murder.

“How many of those who were unjustly condemned preferred to die and be damned rather than be subjected to physical torture or just to put an end to it all! No crimes were more horrific than those perpetrated by the minds of people who, in the name of my Son and the salvation of souls, were capable of the most frenzied attacks that the human brain has ever thought up.”

“Eternal, cruelty was typical of the period, and as for torture...”

“Don't speak to me of torture. The methods invented by the Inquisition have been imitated for centuries. Have you any idea of what the *garrote* is? This form of torture consists of binding the victim tightly with ropes. By gradually twisting

the sticks that are inserted between the ropes and the skin, the flesh and nerves are mangled, sometimes even the bones are broken. This method was very popular in the Spanish dungeons of the Inquisition. The victim would scream in agony and shout out while the inquisitors - hooded and covered in black gowns like hideous catafalques - said their rosaries, interrupting their lazy chanting to request that the victim tell the truth. To my knowledge they never even listened to what the victim said.”

He went on indignantly. “This is nothing though, in comparison to some of instruments of torture that were used. For example the *cog wheel*, which was used to tear limb from limb, special *masks and gloves* which tore into the face and hands, or the *nut* which was clamped and tightened over the skull and other parts of the body, the *drill* which was used to bore down the limbs, or the *billy-goat* - a revolting instrument used on women which consisted of a sharp wedge of wood which was rammed up the lady's private parts, tearing her apart. Then there was the *bell*, which was clanged for hours and hours in the victim's ear...

“How many unknown martyrs have been forced to undergo similar tortures and blurt out their guilt in their tormentor's ear! How many were condemned without any evidence and with no *litis contestatio!*”

“There was always a doctor present at the torture session,

though.”

“Undoubtedly. But he was not there to treat the wounds or give comfort, only to certify the death of the victim. If the victim was innocent the torturers had no qualms. They said a quick prayer for his soul and entrusted it to my mercy, certain that I would send it to Heaven and forgive them their trespasses.”

“Just consider, Eternal,” interjected His Holiness, “how many rumours abound about torture. Far-fetched novels and films have grossly exaggerated the subject in order to satisfy people's morbid curiosity. Torture was often the exception rather than the rule...”

“Far-fetched novels? Nasty films? What do you take me for, *Holiness*? You reckon I need to read comics or go the pictures on Sundays to find out what's going on? I know, because... well, I just know, and that's an end of it!

“As for the tortures, there are records of them. In the pope's palace at Avignon an enormous amount of space was taken up by courts, cells, dungeons, in addition to penitence chambers, torture chambers and religious prisons. The *torture chambers* were built with asymmetrical walls to muffle the cries of the victims. The *judgement chambers* had ceilings with circular vents, so that even a whispered confession could be clearly recorded by the inquisitors on the floor above. Is there anything more dreadful than a torturer who will not

watch the victim suffer but is quite content to hear his laments from a distance, echoing with pain? Preventing a prisoner from seeing his accuser's face must be the basest form of torture!

“The Palace of the Inquisition in Rome was every bit as sinister...”

“Eternal, the dungeons at the palace were turned into archives back in 1870,” His Holiness rejoined.

“A most convenient conversion,” He retorted, before continuing apace.

“Someone wrote that the Inquisition was *the most widespread and consistent atrocity in the history of the civilised world*. Someone else added that *never had such lengthy and constant brutality been seen*. Others claim the Inquisition was *the cruellest institution that humanity has ever known and the most hypocritical to boot, as the church dared to say it did not shed blood*, What else can I say?”

“Eternal, I am deeply grateful for Your visit,” said His Holiness, lying through his teeth. “Yet I find it difficult to understand why You come and complain to me about the inquisitors' crimes. Why didn't You do something about it at the time? Why didn't You crack down on it right away? Why take it out on little old me? You should have appeared to the Patriarch of Jerusalem, my guest at dinner. I work for You, and You could have given me a hand.

“You see, I'm trying to get him to be reasonable about certain points of the doctrine, but he isn't half stubborn! A visit from You would soften him up a bit. But no. You loom up in the dark like some sentinel, and it's... *Who goes there? What's your business?* Then I get all this spiel about crimes committed by popes and inquisitors!”

“Put your mind at rest - I haven't forgotten the Patriarch of Jerusalem. So you reckon I fiddled while Rome burned? Maybe I didn't go far enough, but they all had some saint to vouch for them... it's one of your weaker traits! The saints come to me wringing their hands, and if saints come to you asking favours for their earthy protégés, what do you do? Tell them to get lost?” He asked sarcastically, shaking a finger.

“If the protégé does not deserve it...” His Holiness began.

“If the protégé doesn't deserve it. Easier said than done. Sometimes you have to say 'yes' just to keep the peace. I have to keep things on an even keel, and I don't want the saints to get upset now, do I?” He confided.

“In short, some sort of democracy exists in heaven, though without immunity, without proxy, I gather because You don't abdicate, You don't appoint: there is only You and the Trinity at the top of heaven's hierarchy.” Commented His Holiness caustically.

“You expect *par condicio*, equal opportunities, in heaven, do you? *Holiness*, don't forget it's a *kingdom* not a *republic*.

My enlightened mind makes the decisions, not parliament. You should know that the Trinity is not a triumvirate, as you may believe. The Trinity is Me!” He decreed regally. It is I who say what goes, for the benefit of all and sundry,” He stated categorically. “And up there we don't have commissions or no confidence votes!” He added facetiously.

“Down here, when somebody makes decisions which affect all, then we start to get worried,” His Holiness remarked enigmatically.

“I am Eternal,” He retorted. “Man judges as only a mortal can with his earthly faculties; he cannot comprehend the extent of my thought processes nor my ability to perceive the whole of history simultaneously.”

He stopped for an instant, before pursuing the same theme.

“I did send a lot of sinners to hell, but I could hardly have opened a branch of the Inquisition of my own in heaven, or set up torture chambers and built dungeons, now could I? That's not how justice is done in my book, though no doubt I could have intervened in some other.”

He drew a deep breath, while he tapped his forefinger on his brow. His Holiness knew there was more to come.

“What about that pervert Innocent VIII who succeeded Sixtus IV in 1484?” He resumed with renewed vigour. “Towards the end of his days he used to drink milk from a woman's breast. Three innocent people were even sacrificed,

because they were forced to give him their blood drop by drop. His was putrid and needed replacing, which was hardly surprising, seeing it came from a heart black and dry like a pumice-stone, masterpiece of my Adversary... For example, he issued an edict forcing thousands of Jews to leave Spain or be converted.”

“Those conversions were usually feigned,” His Holiness sneered.

“Which gave the Inquisition plenty to do for several centuries.”

There was a long pause while He waited for His Holiness to say something, but as he did not have the courage, He took up the cudgels once more.

“However, this was small beer in comparison to what one of his successors got up to: Leo X, the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent. I refer to indulgences peddled in the squares, taverns and brothels, authorised by Leo. That extraordinary peddler known as Father Tetzal even guaranteed that by paying a quarter of a Lorraine florin one could buy a place in heaven...

“What blatant unscrupulousness for money! His church was not content with everything he had stolen in my name but expected to snatch Caesar's money and his subjects' as well.”

“But, Eternal, this is of little account: *de minimis non curat pontifex*. Tetzal was an exception. Today the situation is

much improved. As for the power of the Church, it was important to stress its authority so that faith in Your Son would triumph. If they feared us - the Vicars of Christ - the powerful rulers of the earth and the peoples they governed would fear and respect Your name..."

"For thousands of years I've been trying to get people to understand that I do not wish to be feared, merely to be loved..." He burst out, angry again.

"Well, You didn't make Yourself very clear, that's all I can say," His Holiness muttered sullenly, then added:

"You could not expect people to love You for the murders committed by the Jews all that time ago in Your name, which it appears You condoned..."

"Murders?" He queried disbelievingly. "I condoned murders?"

"I do not wish to appear disrespectful, Eternal," His Holiness replied, perceiving he might have breached His defences, "but if I remember rightly, there are passages in the Old Testament which relate the military conquests by Your chosen people, the Jews... Well, You have to admit they got up to all sorts of tricks with Your not so tacit approval. And sometimes even on Your orders."

The apparition was silent, as if rummaging through the records of His boundless memory in search of such remote events.

“You know how it is,” He added, His voice softer now, “my early chroniclers - the patriarchs and prophets of Israel - had to deal with a rather *stiff-necked* bunch of people, who had to be told what was what. So they had to use language their brains - which were even stiffer than their necks - would understand.”

“I see, Eternal...” murmured His Holiness, with a pregnant pause. “But can You really expect us, thousand of years later, to consider You merciful when we read about the massacres committed in Your name, alias *Yahweh Sebaoth* - the God of armies? Thousands upon thousands of poor devils were brutally sacrificed in the struggles which led Israel to the conquest of the Promised Land.

“As I recall, there are quite a few passages from the books of the *Pentateuch* and *Joshua* where those popes you mentioned earlier clearly got their inspiration from!”

“What is quite clear is that you do not understand the language of the Bible,” He stated. “The Jews attributed their deeds to me. Their defeats they considered nothing more than a punishment I inflicted on them for their disobedience, just as their victories were seen as a reward for their loyalty. You know full well that when they were defeated it was because they were disorganised, and when they won it was because they had used better tactics or their enemy was weak. It is understandable that some events were described in crude

terms... But cruelty was practised only by the leaders. They had to make their enemies terrified of my people. For this reason Israel survived, despite all its enemies.”

“You let them get on with it. You allowed massacres to be committed in Your name. In other terms, You turned a blind eye to them!” His Holiness goaded Him.

“It was necessary at that time for my people to fear my name more than their enemies. It was me they needed and it was to me that they came when they were defeated. They fell on their knees with their hearts bleeding, they tore their clothes in sorrow, scattered ashes on their heads and begged me to avenge them. I was all they knew. I was the only role model they had who could stop them from following the idolatry practised by the Canaanites. It was essential that they saw me as a vengeful god, jealous of my unique status and easy to anger, but also merciful when I forgave their frequent descents into idolatry...”

“I wouldn’t have thought You feared competition from other gods,” His Holiness made so bold as to remark.

“I am That I am; I am the true and only God! Thou shalt have no other gods before me... I ordered on Mount Horeb.”

“That is what is written, and what we believe, Eternal, though I don’t think Your chosen people did. I don’t need to remind You that they called You *EI Elohim*, God of Gods. So You were only one god among many, no doubt greater than

them, but not unique...” His Holiness ventured wryly, pausing again deliberately before continuing.

“Your Jews had other gods and they worshipped them because their cult permitted a number of earthly acts which You had forbidden. So they fornicated with the daughters of the Moabites and committed indecent acts before their idols. On that occasion Your reaction was anything but loving - according to the records - because You struck down twenty-four thousand of them on the same day. That was how you showed Your mercy!”

“The other gods were rubbish - all I had to do was look at them and they disintegrated, like Dagon who toppled over before me, his head and hands severed from his body. Worshipping idols distracted my people from worshipping me. So it was necessary to use the might of my arm and mete out just punishment for their offences. Only this way could they comprehend my greatness. The leaders were my representatives, and that is the way they depicted me so that the people would know me and love me.”

“You mean fear You. There's no love where there's fear,” His Holiness remarked cynically.

“When the time was ripe nobody ever doubted my mercy. There were many times when people made me angry but I forgot the retribution I had in mind for them. There were times when they really deserved another Flood!”

“Presumably there are still times today when people deserve something similar. Who would criticise You if You decided to... Hopefully not! It is not true, though, that You have always been merciful. You could destroy everything mercilessly, and only because, as we read in the account of Your Flood in *Genesis*, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair and took them to wife. Incidentally, I must admit I never did understand who the sons of God were, nor the daughters of men. *And it repented the Lord - that's what it says about You - that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart.* Then You announced: *I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.*

“I confess I over-reacted somewhat in Noah's time with the waters...”

“Over-reacted? I'll say so! The world's population was wiped out - man and the animals he had tamed, all flushed down the tubes! What's more it took You one hundred and fifty days to check nothing was still moving.”

“Yes, it was all a bit excessive,” He admitted, after briefly pausing for thought. “However, some other crimes committed by mankind were far worse, and the disasters I have a mind to cause could never begin to atone for them...”

“Quite frankly, Eternal, I don't reckon You've been overgenerous with the human race so far. There have always been disasters: the annals of the history of mankind are full of the direst trials and tribulations. You don't need me to remind You how many times You let rip with Your retribution and caused earthquakes, tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, floods, droughts, famine, plagues, epidemics, all sorts of nasty diseases affecting innocent adults and little children alike, AIDS, and all those other countless catastrophes which You use to show how great You are...”

“You mistake natural events and the consequences of human depravation for my anger...”

“Eternal, maybe I shouldn't respond, but I shall,” announced His Holiness pedantically. “Here on earth they say *not a leaf moves without Him knowing*, meaning that You know everything that goes on - You even know how many hairs each person has on his head. So when nature takes its toll, can You wash Your hands of it? Without listing every single incident which made You angry when you ordered the Flood, I am bound to say that the Scriptures, where Your deeds are recorded, report in minute detail every time You got hot and bothered. And in my humble opinion, it wasn't always justified.”

“Just give me one good example... in your humble opinion!” He replied, feigning curiosity.

“I’ll try, Eternal, but don't blame me if I get my dates wrong. You appeared to me so suddenly I didn't have the time to prepare for Your visit, so I hope my memory serves me right. Right, let's see then...” he began.

“You got angry with us because the Jews were persecuted, for their torture, their ghettos, the pogroms and so on. But surely You behaved the same way?”

“The Jews are my people and if I decided to punish them it was because they deserved it. I will not permit man to judge my actions. Man cannot persecute my people because I have done so myself,” He reasoned solemnly.

“So effectively You're saying that it's up to You to punish them? You've got to admit though, you were a bit heavy-handed, weren't You? And they were Your chosen people who were privileged because they had made a covenant with You! Goodness knows what would have happened if they hadn't had the benefit of Your compassion!”

“The Jews have borne witness to me down the centuries and have survived all their enemies - the Canaanites, Egyptians, Babylonians, Macedonians, Romans, and all the other peoples who subdued them, massacred them and scattered them to the four winds trying to blot them out - of all these peoples nothing is left except their history. Inquisitors, anti-Semites, even Nazis have been confounded, while my people are still here, alive among the ruins,

demonstrating by their sheer existence that I have kept faith with the patriarchs. Does this not prove that they are my chosen people?”

“Eternal, I have to say it is all a bit confusing. What I find quite amazing though, is the extraordinary ability of those people to bear Your severity.”

“Severity?” He queried.

“Maybe severity is rather euphemistic - I correct myself: maltreatment. How else could I define Your behaviour towards them?”

His Holiness scanned His face for a reaction. Then, starting with early times, he listed all the disasters caused by divine rage.

“You had a fit of anger, though I really can't see why, when you tried to kill Moses and all his family, simply because they were not circumcised. You blew Your top when Moses' brother Aaron made the golden calf for the Jews to bow down and worship. *Let me alone* - You said to Moses - *that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them...* Moses besought You to change Your mind: *Turn from Thy fierce wrath and repent of this evil against Thy people.* Fortunately for those poor devils, we are told You did repent, but not without demanding Your pound of flesh, or should I say three thousand dead!”

“*Repentance* is a word invented by the human race to refer

to the property of my mercy, just as *wrath* stands for the supreme expression of my justice,” was His cryptic explanation.

“Then the people rebelled again,” His Holiness persisted, missing the nuance, “and You felt offended. Once again Moses had to intervene, but he told You a fib when he said You were *merciful and long-suffering*... because he wanted Your forgiveness for their iniquity and transgression and sins, hoping You would grant Your clemency. However, You were not impressed and complained because You had been put to the test ten times over, so You decided to drive them out into the desert and consume them. And that is precisely what You did.

“Let me remind You about that time when the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant and You afflicted them with a plague of tumours, which in layman’s terms means piles. This persuaded them to give back the ark to the Children of Israel. However, some of them - namely Jeconiah's offspring - did not exactly go out of their way to thank you for returning the ark, meaning they did not make the sacrifices to You they were supposed to. You didn't take too kindly to that: on the same day You destroyed seventy members of their family with all their possessions.”

His Holiness paused a while, as if collecting his thoughts, before following on along the same lines:

“When Your people did bad things You kept silent. And there were some *really* bad things, like Abraham offering his wife Sarah, as if she were a common prostitute, first to the Pharaoh and then to Abimelech. And what about Jacob who was so cunning as to deprive Esau of his birthright as firstborn? And You didn't like Esau very much, did You? Then there were Simeon and Levi, Jacob's awful renegade sons, who butchered the male inhabitants of Shechem, looted the city and made off with their possessions. Or there was Judah who committed incest with Tamar... The Scriptures are crammed with incidents like these.”

“My justice cannot be interpreted by your limited logic. My justice has more profound dimensions and has nothing in common with the rudimentary scale of crime and punishment set up by the human race. Because your vision is so limited, you can only understand the direct link between cause and effect. And no more. I can assure you no criminal act has ever escaped my judgement.”

His Holiness appeared not to comprehend the complex paradigms of divine justice, as he persisted in the same argument.

“Don't blow Your top, Eternal. A man can only understand what he sees, and in Biblical times what he saw confounded him and frightened the life out of him. You hammered the Egyptians with the famous plagues - boils, gnats, locusts,

hail, flies, lice, darkness and more - then You punished them again when You had all their firstborn male children killed off. You indiscriminately slew man and beast, the just and the unjust, to show a stubborn Pharaoh just how powerful You were. You sent the whole lotto to their Maker... to Yourself, that is it. How could innocent people be to blame, eh? Wouldn't it have been enough to simply waste that obstinate old Pharaoh? Instead of punishing the person responsible it pleased You to smite the defenceless, who had to bear the consequences. This is why I cannot grasp the concept of divine justice, so You must excuse me!" His Holiness sneered, and without waiting for an answer he pressed on.

"But this was nothing in comparison to the massacre You ordered Your chosen people to carry out. The Amalekites, for example, on Your command were all put to the sword; the Amorites were to be eliminated lock, stock and barrel, and the Midianites wiped out and their cattle and material possessions seized."

By now His Holiness was in full flow.

"You lost Your rag when You ordered the destruction of Bashan and the entire populace - no-one was to be spared - or when You torched sixty cities in the Argob strip in the land of Og. Burnt to the ground they were, with all the men, women, children and cattle. Then You decided You would get rid of the Canaanites by driving them out of their land because You

had promised it to the Jews: Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Perezites, Hivites, Jebusites..." he counted, rattling off the names without needing to use his fingers, "all exterminated *en masse*."

His Holiness broke off to draw breath. So His interlocutor took advantage of the pause to remark:

"They were an idolatrous people and I had to drive them from my sight..."

"But what about Your mercy? After all, You did create them. You did not forgive the transgressions of the Jews but You approved them when they killed, tortured and looted, as You ordered them to do, and if they were sometimes moved to pity (meaning You felt they had turned soft), You would turn against them. You blew a gasket when they didn't put the women and children to the sword too, and they obeyed You just sparing the virgins for their pleasure, as You had commanded them.

"You were like an all-consuming fire to the enemies of Your people, to whom You had promised Canaan..."

"This is a highly simplistic version of events which require a completely different interpretation, as I keep telling you. As it happens, I had to keep my side of the bargain with the patriarchs. My people had to inherit the land where milk and honey ran."

"Really Eternal, from what one reads that was a land where

all that ran was blood, and nothing has changed since, incidentally. There is just one small detail You've omitted - that land belonged to other people, who were forced to move out. Joshua, the son of Nun, blasted the walls of Jericho to kingdom come, when the Israelites sounded their trumpets, and then his hordes *utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass with the edge of the sword.* He took Ai by a ruse and killed all the inhabitants - every man Jack of them. He even followed them out into the country and the desert where they had sought shelter. You had twelve thousand of them blitzed in one single day and all their cattle seized.”

“I am getting tired of telling you that the stories you refer to express the events in human terms, the significance of which is not what appears evident but rather what becomes manifest over time,” He explained indulgently.

His Holiness once more ignored the nebulous words and soldiered on.

“Joshua attacked Gibeon and committed a great slaughter there, but You lent a hand by casting down great stones from heaven. There were more who died from the hailstones than were slain by the Children of Israel. Fancy taking on mere mortals! Descending to their level! And yet after Your argument with Jacob You hadn't rowed with anyone! You must admit that on that occasion You behaved like the Greek

gods during the Trojan War,” he commented caustically before continuing his tirade.

“You ordered a motionless star, *Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon* so as to give Your people time to avenge themselves upon their enemy. Joshua, not content with that, blew away the inhabitants of Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Jezer, Hebron and Debir and of many more cities too, by putting their inhabitants to the sword. The lot of them. No-one was spared, just as You had commanded. And just so there would be no doubting his devotion, Joshua blasted a few more Canaanite cities: Hazor, Madon, Shimron, Achshaph and Tirzah, where the people were massacred *even as the sand that is upon the sea shore in multitude* to pay homage to you. All slain. Total extermination, in fact, because *no-one was spared in accordance with what the Lord had instructed*, as it says in the Bible. God's works are supposed to be *good*, not *bad*... and You have the courage to lecture me about the Inquisition, and the iniquity of the popes! I have never ordered any persecution, and as for popes unworthy of their office, I never elected them! It was wrong of man to set them upon the throne of Peter, I agree, but You created them in the first place!”

The moment had come to lose His temper and He lost it completely.

“Blasphemer, foul-mouthed heathen, abomination unto

me.” He burst out, no longer able to contain Himself, shaking his fists which had hitherto been covered by the wide sleeves of His tunic. His knuckles were white with rage. The halo in a triangle round His head flashed, shook, bent, sparked, then gave up the ghost like a dud light bulb.

“You dare to judge my works and my designs!” He bellowed. “You, an imperfect creature, a lump of insignificant matter, you... son of iniquity and source of perdition, dare to suggest how I should interpret my decisions!” His anger was fearful to behold as He panted uncontrollably. “Of course, I should have remembered what a gloomy soul I gave you! Your heart is as black as midnight! Your god is the lord of darkness! it is he you work for.”

After that outburst He calmed down for a moment, before letting rip once more.

“How can I expect the truth from someone who lives by deceit! How can I expect you to comprehend and respect my mysteries! The laws of life which I have decreed have an equilibrium which your sick human mind could never grasp. My ways are infinite, don't forget. My mercy manifests itself through events which are apparently destructive and cruel,” He spat out. “For the sake of the human race, made up of conceited brass-faced individuals like yourself, I have been merciful and sacrificed my own Son for you...”

So it was back to the *mysteries of God* then... This really

was a sticking point, but it was also an easy way of solving problems. The Eternal Father used this ploy when He ran out of inspiration. By now His Holiness had rumbled it: the *mysteries of God* could be safely used whenever it is necessary to mask the face of ignorance. But he let that one go and remarked instead:

“It was You who wanted mankind to be profligate and impertinent. So why do You complain when people behave outrageously? Your gesture is no doubt magnanimous - the human race is indebted to You for sacrificing Your Son. But wait a minute - are we sure man has actually been saved by Christ’s sacrifice? People seem to get worse and worse and kill in ever more subtle ways! I feel that Christ, rather than a channel for repentance and reflection is frequently an excuse, so that they can let their hair down.

“Look what happens at Christmas! It's nothing more than crude revelry - *ludibrium et debacchatio oscenum!* Hardly the way to celebrate the day the Saviour was born, is it? Some like to spend Christmas skiing or sunbathing on tropic islands, and the other feast-days are treated more or less the same way.

“I carry out my duties, I try to keep things on an even keel: I admonish, preach, bless, and so on, but the crowds of people who come to see me seem more interested in the pomp and ceremony surrounding me than in the religious importance of

my role.”

His Holiness was whinging again.

“The synods, conferences, councils, meetings behind closed doors make little impression on people. My encyclicals and pastorals are read only by the clergy. People are fickle. They bear what they want to bear. They are no longer committed to a cause to fight and win. The allure of Your Son's sacrifice has evaporated, because the very idea of sacrifice is unpleasant. Maybe it was unnecessary, too! An empty gesture, know what I mean? And the result in terms of human gratitude is hardly encouraging.”

“People are blind. They have a false sense of security gained through material possessions. They do not heed my words, and your church has encouraged them to yield to temptation by emphasising the outward and ceremonial aspects of religion. Man has become lazy and indifferent; or it has pleased him - merely as an intellectual challenge - to invent doctrines and theories which have led him to posit that *God is dead*. It is a philosophy which kills more than the Cross.” He muttered less angrily. His great eyes, usually overflowing with goodness, were dimmed by demoralisation.

“The Church is nowhere near as rich as it was” His Holiness explained. “And anyway, weren't you criticising material possessions just now? You must admit that people believed in You when the Church had the voice of

authority...”

No answer was forthcoming, as He looked down pensively and smoothed His beard.

“We are light-years away from the truth of Christ,” His Holiness continued, “because His sacrifice is increasingly difficult to understand the way people reason today. In effect, Your Son's sacrifice is nothing but an illusion - Jesus was dead *pro tempore*, shall we say, seeing as You resurrected Him. So it was little more than a trick, a sleight of hand, a void deed. People are not very impressed with that kind of thing nowadays. They feel it is an insult to their intelligence.”

“My Son's sacrifice is the highest expression of my justice and mercy,” He decreed peevishly.

His Holiness really could not understand what all this business of divine justice was about. However, he pursued his argument.

“So if I may sum up: You create man as a sinful insolent creature, almost as if to test Your own endurance, then You lose Your temper (a frequent occurrence) and what happens? To satisfy Your superior sense of justice and because You cannot go on destroying this creature of Yours which has been so unsuccessful, You pretend to sacrifice Your Son... in other words, You punish Yourself. So everything's fine and dandy! Justice has been done! But I wouldn't say it solved the problem, because the indifference of the human race is ample

proof of it.”

“So I pretended to sacrifice my Son! My Son who died on the Cross suffering the martyrdom of humiliation and the death of an outcast...” He burst out. “He was sacrificed for the sins of man! Consciously and painfully!” He pointed out. “You know how many people were blindly slaughtered by the sins of the popes - even you have a guilty conscience about it - so you should be able to understand the enormous significance of this act of mine! The sacrifice of my Son saved man from eternal damnation and made him my heir and joint-heir with my Son. This was made clear by Paul in Chapter VIII of his *Epistle to the Romans...*”

“No doubt, but Your Son knew he would rise again, because the Son of God cannot die. Anyway, what was the purpose of this sacrifice if man whom You saved from the sin of Adam has not been saved from himself and his devilish intellect? He has worsened to such a degree, as I pointed out earlier, that he fully deserves Your punishment, like a good old Flood for example, and instead You reward him and talk about making him Your heir...”

His Holiness pondered for a moment on the significance of the word *heir*. He really could understand nothing more than its earthly connotation.

“Man as Your heir...” he announced in some bewilderment. “According to the laws of the land, the heir

stands to inherit the estate of a deceased person. Thus, we will all be Your heirs and joint-heirs with Your Son. When You die.

“Sorry... Good heavens, what I meant was the death of God... just in theory of course, though the atheistic theology of Christianity has certainly muddied the waters... it's all nonsense really - pointless speculation... a paradoxical intellectual exercise. Without God faith has no meaning; neither does religion, nor man himself, because he would be deprived of hope, which gives existence meaning. You speak of a celestial inheritance? The death of God which is the only way to justify this inheritance also paradoxically renders it void, because inheritance, which is life eternal in this case, would not be enjoyed in the light of Your glory, but in the sight of Your... corpse. It's grotesque!” He squeaked, giving vent to his emotion.

“As usual you follow your own logic and get the wrong end of the stick,” He replied, unexpectedly quietly. “Just forget for a moment your notions of what my inheritance means and recognise the fact that if man has got worse much of the responsibility lies with your predecessors. It is they who distorted the message of my Son.” He was blustering now, breathing heavily through His enormous nostrils which were like two deep black wells “Eternal, we have already said that...”

“Yes, I know, I haven't gone gaga yet!”

“Sometimes one just repeats things without realising it. Even I do it,” His Holiness added facetiously. “Anyway, as far as I'm concerned, all I can say is that the Church has done everything it could to provide moral guidance. There may have been some bad popes, but they were a minority compared to all the saints and martyrs that Catholicism has produced in the course of the centuries for the edification of man and the exaltation of Your name.”

“That's as may be, but if I had had to accommodate them all heaven would have been chock-a-block. What's more, you lot have tried to pass off quite a few as saints who were anything but saintly. Others were not even converted to Christianity, like all those Hebrew prophets - Zacchariah, Amos, Hosea, Haggai, Habbakkuk, just to name a few. Then there were the patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and so forth. There was even Esau, whom you made a saint, knowing full well I couldn't stand the man. Moses and Joshua became saints too, and they had guilty consciences, didn't they? You said so yourself just now. And what about David and Solomon, who were certainly no angels - you elevated them to celestial glory. Adam and Eve? I throw them out of Eden because they were sinners and you return them to me as saints.

“Not to mention all the other blessed souls you never stop

recommending. Asking favours is one of your distinguishing characteristics, as I said, and it is by no means limited to saints...”

“Canonisation of biblical characters is a sign of devotion towards Jesus' forebears and all those who foretold His works and predicted His coming,” His Holiness remarked.

“That's not devotion, it's absent-mindedness. You invented saints and martyrs to fill a calendar which was already overloaded. You canonised roles too, for example - St Christopher the *carrier of Christ* or Christian; pagan divinities like St Dionysius, the Greek god of intoxication, and St Bacchus, his Roman counterpart; St Isidore, a combination of Isis and Horus; St George, who for some is the Egyptian god Horus and for others symbolises Gea, Mother Earth, which is why he is the patron saint of countryfolk. You made Gabriel a saint - my messenger and an archangel - and he became the patron saint of postmen. Then there was St Onesimus - a slave who escaped and was mentioned by Paul in his *Epistle to Philemon* - who was given the job of patron saint of domestics and waiting staff.”

It was not over yet.

“By simple alliteration you made a saint of Latinus, whose name resembles *latte*, the Italian for milk, who is invoked by women when suffering from lack of milk; St Lucy is the saint who protects eyes and light *sources*, like television; St Faith

(virgin and martyr) is a symbol of virtue who personifies the ideal of faith, together with her sisters Hope and Charity (also virgins and martyrs) - all daughters of St Sapience, who was a martyr but clearly not a virgin. I could reel off a list as long as your arm: St Gennaro, St Castrese or female saints like Philomena, who is usually inscribed on ampullae found centuries ago in the catacombs of Priscilla.”

He stopped for an instant, lifted His gaze heavenwards as if in search of inspiration from some unknown source, and set off again.

“You had St Longinus canonised, who killed my Son. His name comes from the lance which he used to pierce my Son's side. Even mere objects have been canonised, like the *vera eicon* - the cloth used to wipe the sweat from Jesus' brow along the *Via Crucis*. This became St Veronica. You even found a husband for this saint: Amator, who quite possibly became a saint because of his lewd habits.

“And what about Pilate? You even made *him* a saint! Pilate, the man who had my Son crucified! He came before me, a basin under his arm and washing his hands, which was supposed to prove his innocence. When I threw him out of heaven, he realised that it is I who say what goes up there. This was a group canonisation - just fancy - because you made his wife Claudia Procula a saint too. Then there is a bunch of saints all to do with sex: St Phallianus, St Genitor,

St Fotina, and so on .”

“But they were all demoted!” His Holiness was quick to respond.

“They may not be formally recognised any more, but you can be sure they are all venerated: superstition has only been abolished officially. No-one dares to suggest the faithful should not worship them any longer.”

“Oh You couldn't do that, Eternal, you have to be flexible! Never mind about St Philomena, St Faith or St Pilate, but St Gennaro! He's got plenty of punters. How on earth can You forget him? He doesn't do any harm, after all. And just try telling the Neapolitans their patron saint is a nobody! They've always so many problems, why not let them have their own special saint? It doesn't take much to satisfy them. I grant You, the swear words start flying when the saint's blood doesn't liquefy, but that's all. The people are quite content with this inoffensive miracle. Each one interprets it as he or she wishes, and they are happy till the next event.”

“That is nothing but superstition! Fancy insulting a saint in church, blaspheming at the altar...”

“The followers of St Gennaro are a special case. They swear a lot, as I have said, but inspired by faith and as a sign of faith.”

“Superstition!” He bellowed. “Instead of the blood liquefying - if it really is blood - why doesn't the saint soften

the hearts of stone of those people? The truth is that this so-called miracle is nothing but a way for you to divert the attention of Christians away from more important religious issues, so that you can harvest the material benefits. For example, the cult of saints is backed up by the cult of their remains, which is sheer idolatry.

“Just think how fruitful the souvenir market has been. The folly of gullibility reached its climax with the adoration of my Son's foreskin and tummy-button. Not even I have been able to count how many foreskins and tummy-buttons are kept in churches - all of which purport to be the real thing, needless to say. There are lots more relics, too: bones, teeth, nails, hair, limbs, footprints, hands, even entire bodies - mummified, skeletal and stiffened - of saints, virgins, martyrs, monks, anchorites, many of whom were never even born.”

So the litany went on.

“Several heads of John the Baptist are venerated; a dozen of St Juliana; there are about ten bodies of St George, and amazingly this saint never lived *either alone or as a group*, as someone once said. Then there are the jaw, shrivelled tongue and even the vocal chords of St Anthony. Just fancy - even a feather from the wings of my archangel Gabriel has been preserved (but there's also one of Brother Cipolla, mentioned in the *Decameron*), in addition to a finger belonging to the Holy Ghost... a wing I suppose, but a finger! How pagan and

vulgar it all is!

“As for relics which are not parts of the body the list is long, and it would probably turn your stomach over again...”

“For God's sake... I mean Your sake, please refrain,” His Holiness interrupted, as His words had started off the burning pangs in his belly again, “it's been absolute hell... Spare me, I beg of You. In any case, I know all about those relics... a piece of the iron chain used to bind St Peter; the grille from St Laurence's cell; the knife used to circumcise Jesus; Mary's personal belongings...”

“That's right!” He commented disinterestedly as if to punish him, “but don't forget the holy shroud of Turin - the winding sheet used to wrap Jesus in, which apparently has the impression of His body on it. Amazing, isn't it, that the sheet was made at least a thousand years after the year of His death. Then there are lots of other shrouds - about forty I believe - all equally authentic and cult objects; and how about the nails used to crucify Jesus? There are literally thousands of them around.”

It wasn't over yet.

“The thorns in His crown? A veritable forest it would be if you put them all together. And the splinters of the Cross? You say: *God only knows*, but I assure you - I don't,” He confessed in some bewilderment.

“Eternal, these are things which should induce us to

reflect...” His Holiness suggested mellifluously, massaging his belly.

“I realise I can't hold you responsible for everything, *Holiness*. Actually, you are just the last link in a very long chain. You are even capable of philosophical concern for my *health*, which worries you because any deterioration of it would affect man's welfare. Maybe I should blame myself if things have got this bad. I should have done something earlier, like striking while the iron was hot. It's clear something needs to be done.”

Silence fell.

A silence so deep and gloomy that His Holiness did not dare to speak. He trembled. Whatever the outcome, He would have won. In any competition between God and man God always wins. His Holiness felt his hour was nigh.

“What on earth will my punishment be?” was his anguished thought. “It's quite clear I'll be the first: He'll drive me from His sight, as He used to do to people in the past. He'll burn me to ashes on the spot or the earth will suddenly open up beneath my feet, which is what happened to Korah, Dathan and Abiram...”

“It's no good. It won't do!” He pronounced pensively. “Destruction by fire or purification by water... Then we'll see if the human race will come to heel! We shall see what we shall see! But you, *Holiness*, just think... think on...” He said,

shaking His white head sadly while His voice started to fade and the apparition became hazy.

“Destruction by fire, purification by water,” His Holiness repeated anxiously. Those words were as clear as crystal. They were His traditional instruments - the tools He had often used so successfully...

All at once, against the blue background of the sky, the white of His beard seemed to dim the redness of His face. Might these colours red, white and blue - symbolic of the French revolution where so many had died - signify another revolution? The triangular halo around His head gave off a few sparks then went out completely, and the immense cloud which was the Eternal Father evaporated little by little into nothing more than a black speck, like a tiny bird fluttering its delicate wings on its way up to Heaven.

“Ah,” His Holiness thought, “it's turning into the Holy Ghost.”

He opened his eyes, rubbing them hard, while Sister Candida, who was opening the shutters, made a reverential bow to him.

Suddenly a shaft of light shot through the dull panes of glass in the window, followed by a crash of thunder. Sister Candida automatically made the sign of the cross.

It was pouring down outside.

“He's decided it's to be water!” His Holiness surmised,

resigned to his fate.

On the wall opposite the bed, set against the pale blue, the enormous black cross loomed, the bars stretching from side to side like in a prison. Silhouetted there was the black speck, which had now turned into a harmless little bat flapping its wings, frightened by the sudden light. It was desperately trying to get out, deceived by the artificial sky blue behind the cross.

“A very good morning to you, Your Holiness,” beamed Sister Candida. “It’s raining cats and dogs outside!”

“Alas, so I see. It was only to be expected.”

“Oh, my goodness!” Exclaimed the shocked nun, lifting her hand to her mouth. “A bat! How could it have got in?” She gave a start and made the sign of the cross again.

“He doesn't need to announce His arrival - He just appears when He feels like it,” mused His Holiness.

“The nuns who do this room will get a right telling off, I can assure you!” she said, upset. “I promise Your Holiness it will not happen again. I shall order Father Jacob to go through the room with a toothcomb every evening, and shut the doors and windows tight.”

“As if that were enough!” His Holiness remarked to himself, automatically groping for his slippers with his feet as he got out of bed.

“Surely it didn't come in by way of the Holy Spirit?”

“Who can tell?”

“Fortunately nothing nasty happened,” the nun remarked, concerned for His Holiness. “You know, they say bats can cut your face open with their wings...”

“Worse, Sister.”

“Worse?”

“The worst of all nightmares. Like Jacob, I’m safe by a miracle.”

“Father Jacob?”

“No, that other Jacob... the Patriarch.”

“The Patriarch too?” The poor nun mused in bewilderment. “I don’t understand Your Holiness... Father Jacob, the Patriarch of Jerusalem?”

“Forget it, Sister,” His Holiness retorted.

“Your Holiness, you are all red and perspiring, you’ve got awful bags under your eyes...! Are you sure you fell all right?” She asked anxiously.

“Yes, I’m fine now. It was the Eternal... nightmare... I mean, the bat. But luckily it’s gone... at least I think so!”

Rain lashed the window pane.

“It’s pouring down, you say Sister,” he repeated pensively. “Maybe the worst has yet to come.”

“Thy will be done!” She recited, without understanding. Once again, she instinctively made the sign of the cross.