

The American Pope

I. INTROIT

John Cardinal Harrigan was more than a product of his environment. The result of a scandalous union between a lonely vicar and a star-struck communicant, his life might have been governed by the ignominy of its origin. Instead the Family Harrigan, as they were referred to in society columns of the day, protected their errant daughter and her ill-gotten offspring. Secretly adopted by an older brother and his wife, he would carry the family name with grace and style, working his way up the hierarchy of the very organization that sired him.

His biological father, long since perished, atoned for his sin working as a missionary in the Philippines. His biological mother acted as doting aunt through his infancy and adolescence, revealing the full story of his lineage only when he reached his majority. A rude awakening, but at that time he had already completed undergraduate studies with the Jesuits, and faced his first in a long line of decisions concerning his career path.

While he relished the scholarship and challenging arguments posed by his professors, he determined to start off at the bottom of one of the Earth's oldest organizations. Three years at a lackluster seminary, then on to the life of a parish priest, disappointing his family who were more ambitious about his future.

In time he would come around to his family's way of thinking, not for personal aggrandizement, but for the greater good of those he served. "Malt does more than Milton can, to justify God's ways for man"¹, but money and power play a vital role in divinity. Feeding the hungry and clothing the naked are ancient examples of the social gospel. Lobbying the State Legislature and Congress are more contemporary examples.

¹ A.E. Housman

All through his career, Father Harrigan benefitted from the unseen hands of the Harrigan patriarch and matriarch, for there was an equality in their relationship that belied their Irish Catholic roots. And there was not the slightest hint of scandal when it came to Father Harrigan's social involvement with his flock (male and female), for his own birth bore witness to the need for celibacy.

The troubles in Boston – pedophile priests and hierarchical cover-up – contributed in part to his meteoric rise in the Episcopate. His parents and grandparents also played a significant role in the liturgical chess game, providing each parish he served with generous bequests to support building programs, social services, recreation and education, not to mention a few staggering winter heating bills.

His superiors suspected his own administrative and evangelical skills could not account totally for the good fortune of the churches he served, but they were too busy shredding files and pointing fingers at one another.

The youngest bishop in Massachusetts history, he fit right in at St. Mary's Cathedral in Fall River, Massachusetts. A predominantly Catholic town, it achieved some notoriety as site of Lizzie Borden's alleged matricide and patricide. Those of you old enough to remember the Chad Mitchell Trio's vocal tribute to her alleged depredation and subsequent acquittal can explain that to younger readers.

It took some time for his family to maneuver him into position to become Archbishop of Boston, but his elevation to Cardinal came rapidly, as an embarrassed Pope hastened to restore faith in the faithful. To all accounts, John Cardinal Harrigan was squeaky clean. The ill-gotten gains of his family, which mirrored somewhat the experience of the Kennedy Clan, were not held against him. Peter's Pence was happy with small, unmarked bills – even large marked bills. And the Vatican was also quite comfortable with Visa and American Express.

What the Pope and his inner circle did not know was – John Cardinal Harrigan was his own man. One who differed privately with Rome's edict on family planning. He was personally grateful that his family embraced the Right to Life, but his mother, "aunt"

and grandmother were circumspect contributors to Planned Parenthood at home and abroad. If this were the CIA, the Cardinal would be a mole. Instead, he was just a caring Christian, who saw the handwriting on the wall. *Mene Mene, Tekel Upharsin*. He had weighed Rome's dictates in his own balance, and found them wanting.

Take the Philippines for example. The land where his biological father died a generation ago, murdered by rebels on a backwater island. A piece of the planet suitable for a population of 50 million now housed close to 100 million, due in part to Rome's outright prohibition on birth control - an illogical regulation considering the Church's even greater edict concerning abortion. John Cardinal Harrigan considered such hypocrisy a highly original sin.

Little did he know he would not rest on his laurels in Boston, with box seats at Red Sox games, clam chowder and lobster bisque. The Family Harrigan had greater things planned for their beloved son. And greater things planned for the Roman Catholic Church.

You've heard of *Opus Dei*, an arch-conservative organization formally known as The Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei². The sort of group Dan Brown would castigate in *The DaVinci Code*. But I bet you haven't heard of *Deus Irae*³, a secret liberal faction that planned to liberate the Catholic Church from hidebound strictures and aging, misogynist prelates. With grizzly and imaginative measures, they had labored the past twenty years to move like-minded clerics into key positions, removing human obstacles in their way, until the day when Rome's stranglehold would falter, and even their monopoly on transubstantiation would give way to a more generic, universal celebration of the Last Supper.

John Cardinal Harrigan was aware of his family's benevolence towards his beloved institution, but oblivious to the activities of *Deus Irae*, even though their efforts would ultimately benefit him, and in their mind, all of Christendom. No secret handshake or magic decoder ring, members identified one another by humming the opening eight notes of the *Dies Irae, Dies Illa*. Yes, those may

² Work of God.

³ God of Wrath.

be lyrics in Mozart's Requiem (everyone who can sit up and take nourishment in America has seen *Amadeus* at least twice), but I refer to the well-known Gregorian chant:



The ultimate goal of *Deus Irae* was to “pack the Supreme Court”, or rather tip the balance in the College of Cardinals, consisting of some 110 Cardinals under 80 years old, charged with electing the next pope. Continued good health of the current Vicar of Christ and Pontifex Maximus would be guaranteed until *Deus Irae* was satisfied it could swing the necessary two-thirds-plus-one vote (and you think the U.S. Senate can’t make a decision). That day was fast approaching. Not blue smoke and mirrors, but white smoke would rule the day before this novel concludes.

But electing a new, enlightened pope would be only the beginning of the story, not the end. Consider this chapter the Alpha of our non-scholarly tome. Even the Omega is not the end of the story.

II. VENGEANCE IS MINE

G. Roger McGovern was born in 1970 to a large, pious, Alabama family. Growing up Catholic in the Deep South was no mean feat. Masons outnumbered Knights of Columbus, and Catholics were deemed slightly better than Communists in that conservative land. His family began calling him by his middle name when George McGovern was defeated by Richard Nixon in '72. Some crosses are too much to bear.

Years later, he landed a middle management job at the Hyundai plant in Montgomery, Alabama. His religion was no drawback when Korean Buddhists picked him to oversee 250 soulless robots. He was especially proud of their powerful V-6 engines, made on-site, which put most Japanese imports to shame.

His family raised a few eyebrows when he started building foreign cars on American soil, but he reminded them that he worked for South Korean Capitalists, not North Korean Communists. His employers never perpetrated war crimes against American GI's, unlike their Japanese competitors.

An active member of the Holy Name Society at St. Paul's Church (not to be confused with the Cathedral in Birmingham – 90 miles to the north), Roger was a friendly and popular chaperone/coach for their Catholic Youth Organization. Recently widowed (from a car accident involving a Ford and a Chevy, mind you), he had yet to rebound from emotional devastation, though he had caught the eye of several co-workers at the plant, plus the checkout 'girl' at the Piggly Wiggly, who was actually a graduate student at nearby Alabama State University.

All very well and good, but there was a dark side to Roger's makeup. A credible marksman, thanks to a prolonged stint in the National Guard, he had grown increasingly indignant about late term abortions, and the doctors who performed them. "Performed" is not the operative word for the OB/Gyns, who wished that a simple pharmaceutical intervention could obviate the need for their services, but Roger had been deeply moved by Father Edwards' frequent diatribes against family planning, decrying the selfish hedonism of those who engaged in sexual activity solely for recreational purposes.

Father Edwards failed to practice what he preached. His own forays into the realm of recreational sex required frequent visits to a distant drug store, lest an unplanned procreational byproduct of such activity led to scandal for his “special friends” and economic ruination for himself. The Rectory had no Nursery.

Add to the human equation one Dr. Marion Crowe, originally from Birmingham. His family left there in disgust in 1963, shortly after the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. His pediatrician father was pleased when Marion followed in his footsteps, attending med school in Mobile. The University of South Alabama's College of Medicine was considered inferior to the University of Alabama's Medical School – in Birmingham, but the family had made a solemn vow never to return to that tainted city.

A reluctant gynecologist, Dr. Crowe despised the ignorance of parents, school systems and students who, unlike Fr. Edwards, knew not the first thing about contraception. White or black, they were equally ignorant, and all too often, too late to avail themselves of legitimate medical treatment. “Increase and multiply, and fill the Earth,” the Bible mandated. Now that the Earth was full, what next?

Marion resented government and political interference in his profession. It was tricky enough, given abysmal pre-natal nutrition, alcohol and drug abuse, for ultrasound to accurately determine the degree of fetal development, even in the second trimester – ranging from 14 to 24 weeks. That afternoon's dilatation and evacuation procedure went fairly well, if one ignored the fact that the patient, victimized by a drunken uncle, had just turned 13. Thankfully, the patient was in her early second trimester. Following a thorough pelvic exam, the standard protocol included IV sedation, local anaesthetic and liberal application of betadine solution. That was followed by ultra-sound guided removal of the fetus and placenta. A fifteen minute process could undo the damage to the young girl's body, though her psyche would be forever scared by the experience, not of abortion, but incestuous rape. Dr. Crowe would gladly have provided a free vasectomy to the uncle – without anaesthetic.

Dr. Crowe looked forward to a weekend free of medical intervention. Dinner out with his wife that evening, followed by

tickets to the Montgomery Symphony on Saturday, when his nephew Vernon Crowe was guaranteed to dazzle the audience with his cello.

What he did not plan on was Roger McGovern and his Ruger Mini Thirty, an upscale cousin of their well-known Mini-14. Developed in 1987 to meet local hunting regulations, it fired the same Russian 7.62x39mm cartridge used in the AK-47, with ballistics similar to a .30-30 Winchester. Guaranteed to stop a deer in its tracks. On the edge of the clinic parking lot, hidden in a hedge of cypress, Roger waited patiently for the good doctor to approach his ten year old Volvo (with rusty MD plates). Dr. Crowe opened his trunk to stash his medical bag then turned to the left, at which time an armor-plated slug passed through his skull with predictably tragic results.

Roger returned his weapon to its case, then retraced his steps to his waiting Hyundai Sonata, an affordable and ubiquitous vehicle in Alabama. Driving five miles under the posted limit, he was a mile away before the first sound of sirens filled the air. 'One less baby killer', he thought to himself. He would sleep well that night, after he cleaned his gun, then usher the Saturday afternoon vigil mass at St. Paul's, followed by a CYO bowling tournament. Last time Father Edward's team, the Gutter Snipes beat Roger's Raiders. This time it would be different.

III. REQUIEM

A week passed. Time for Dr. Crowe's family to make final arrangements, concluding with a well-attended memorial service Saturday morning at Third Presbyterian Church, where he had served as an Elder for the past five years. The minister wished his church could be as full on Sundays, Christ's death two thousand years ago being more than ample encouragement for attendance. Family, friends, local activists and medical colleagues filled the pews, and the Rev. Dr. Miles Lewis's homily evoked tears and anger. Tears upon the death of a dear friend. Anger at his barbaric execution - one that would befuddle Montgomery's 500+ police department for weeks to come.

The funeral cortège to Lawnwood Cemetery, just outside the city limits, was a long one, with motorcycle escort provided by Chief Davis, whose daughter had once benefitted from Dr. Crowe's professional services.

Major Paul McCann, chief of Alabama's Bureau of Investigation sent a team to stake out the perimeter of the Cemetery, taking surveillance photos of all those in proximity to Dr. Crowe's interment site. "Returning to the scene of the crime" was not just for arsonists.

He was not the only one to keep an eye on the proceedings. At the far end of the cemetery, Roger McGovern took advantage of a granite memorial to bench rest his Ruger Mini Thirty. What had been a gray, drizzly day turned into bright sun by the time the funeral parlor's limousines, flower cars and hearse arrived on the scene. Leaving nothing to chance, Roger had measured off the distance the night before. Still air meant no cross wind to factor in. Roger's target, Dr. Mira Lawson, head of Montgomery's Planned Parenthood Association. A tall, striking blond. Her death would send a signal to all the other baby killers out there that Dr. Crowe's death was not a random act.

At graveside the Rev. Dr. Miles Lewis recited the inevitable 23rd Psalm, while Dr. Crowe's wife and family bent down to throw handfuls of dirt on his southern pine coffin. Dr. Lawson stood off to one side, briefly obscured by one of the funeral parlor staff

arranging a floral display. Then she was in the clear, one trigger away from eternity.

Roger wiped the sweat from his brow, then dried his hands and proceeded to aim and squeeze.

“I don’t think so,” Major McCann said, as he pressed his government issue 9 mm Glock to Roger McGovern’s left temple. Lieutenant Matthews extracted the Ruger Mini Thirty from Roger’s hands, while the major cuffed his prey, and hustled him into the back of an unmarked car.

With their prisoner properly restrained in the back seat, the Major took the wheel, driving at a discrete speed out of the cemetery, then headed for open country.

“Where are you taking me?” Roger inquired. Last Saturday’s bowling triumph over the Gutter Snipes would be his last hurrah, or so he thought.

“Manila.” Despite his profession, which called for command presence, and periodic, semi-ethical interrogation techniques, Major McCann hated bullies. His great uncle had been part of the 89th Infantry Division (the Rolling W) that liberated Buchenwald back in ’45. Major McCann also hated people who double parked during rush hour, and people who played their car stereos too loud. But his major enmity was reserved for Right to Life assassins, who thought freedom of religion meant they had the freedom to impose their religion on everyone else.

“Manila? Like, in the Philippines?”

“Either that or an unmarked grave. You waived your Miranda rights when you started sighting in on another victim.”

Disbelief was followed by stunned silence in the back seat, while the Major and Lt. Matthews discussed the Crimson Tide in the front seat. Harmless conversation while they ticked off the miles to an air strip twenty miles outside of town.

At the air strip Roger was handed off to a pair of average looking men who afforded Roger the opportunity to water a tree before strapping him into his seat for a quick hop to Mexico – where he would transfer to a larger plane for the long haul to Manila.

“Why Manila?” Roger asked. No one answered. Hyundai’s 250 soulless robots would need to seek spiritual guidance from someone else, for Roger’s predictable, easy life had come to an end. Roger wondered if his life itself would follow suit.