

It is said that if a lie is repeated often enough and loudly enough, people will come to believe it. That isn't necessarily so.

A real whopper may never be believed fully by anyone, no matter how often or loudly it is proclaimed, but for a whopper to be effective, it does not need to be believed in every detail. It is enough that it leaves behind a bad impression. People will think that if anyone bothers to promote such a lie, there must be a kernel of truth in it.

The same goes for exaggeration and false implications. Distort the truth and people will think it has some basis in fact. Take a truth and phrase it in such a way that it looks suspicious, or juxtapose it with an acknowledged evil, and the mind will be tempted to draw all sorts of ill-founded conclusions.

The following are three examples of the whoppers, exaggerations, and false implications found in the writings of professional anti-Catholics. These are not isolated slips of the pen. They are the kinds of things that fill tracts to overflowing, and they demonstrate that anti-Catholic writers often use dishonest reporting to advance their cause.

THE JOKE'S ON JONES

Not long after Pope Paul VI died in 1978, Bob Jones, chancellor of Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina, wrote an ill-tempered article in his school's magazine, *Faith for the Family* (not to be confused with Dr. James Dobson's magazine, *Focus on the Family*). The article was republished by the Fundamentalist organization Mission to Catholics, International (run by an ex-Carmelite priest-turned-Fundamentalist minister) as a tract entitled *The Church of Rome in Perspective*.

No effort is made to be conciliatory, as the first line demonstrates: "Pope Paul VI, archpriest of Satan, a deceiver and an anti-Christ, has, like Judas, gone to his own place." It goes downhill from there. At one point, Jones attempts to raise the level of discussion, if only momentarily, by citing a diary kept by Bernard Berenson, the famous art collector and critic (who was, by the way, an Episcopalian). Here

is what Jones says:

"A pope must be an opportunist, a tyrant, a hypocrite, and a deceiver or he cannot be a pope. Bernard Berenson, in his *Rumor and Reflection* (a sort of notebook which he kept while hiding from the Germans in the hills above Florence during the Second World War), tells about the death of an early twentieth-century pope as described by his personal physician. When they came to give him the last rites, the pope ordered the priest and acolytes from the room, crying, 'Get out of here. The comedy is over.'"

The implication is that some unidentified pope, knowing his end was at hand, acknowledged that his office and religion were jokes and that he had lived a lie. That would be a damning indictment if true—but was it? Compare what Jones gives with what Berenson actually wrote. This is the entire entry for May 5, 1941, and it is found on page 43 of *Rumor and Reflection*, which was published by Simon and Schuster in 1952:

"Yesterday a friend was here, a Roman of good family, closely related to the late Cardinal Vannutelli and thus in touch with the Vatican. He told me that soon after the death of Pope Benedict XV, his own father was dying. A priest was called in, but the father refused to see him.

"Thinking to comfort the son, the priest said: 'Don't take it hard. Such things will happen nowadays. Why, the late Holy Father on his deathbed sent away the priests with: 'Off with you, the play is over' (*la commedia e finita*). His Holiness surely meant *commedia* as in the *Divine Comedy*, the title of Dante's masterpiece," Berenson states.

The problem is not just that Jones did not report the words accurately or that he attributed the story to the pope's physician or that he was repeating material that he got at least third-hand. The problem is that he did not know (or care) what the pope meant by "*la commedia e finita*."

The word "comedy" is used in a much older sense than the one having to do with humor. Throughout history, until very recently, a "comedy" was simply a play or story with a happy ending (the opposite of a tragedy). What we today refer to as a comedy was

then called a farce, and the pope did not say, "Get out of here, the farce is over," which even itself does not mean, "Get out of here, the mockery which has been my life is over."

Berenson was right to translate "*la commedia e finita*" as "the play is over." Another way to put it might be, "The drama of my life is over," which is hardly the confession of duplicity that Jones wishes us to think the pope made.

The drama of the pope's life had a happy ending, for he did not say, "The tragedy is over."

A SNARE AND A DELUSION

The Conversion Center of Havertown, Pennsylvania, puts out some of the more amusing anti-Catholic leaflets, though none is supposed to be taken humorously. One is called *10 Reasons Why I Am Not a Roman Catholic*. Although written some years ago and never updated, it still makes the rounds. Here are a few of the reasons given by the anonymous author.

"1. The papacy is a hoax. Peter never claimed to be pope. He was never in Rome."

It is true that Peter could not have used the term "pope" to describe himself, since the title was not conferred on the bishops of Rome during the earliest years of the Church. (Neither does the Bible claim to be "the Bible," for that term had not been invented yet; it simply claimed to be God's inspired word.) But that is hardly the point, since the question is not the title used, but the existence of the office of pope, which has been united to the office of the bishop of Rome on the basis that Peter went to Rome and died there. It follows that if Peter never went to Rome (this is the real question), then he could hardly have been its bishop, and the present bishop of Rome could hardly be his successor.

Although the Bible has no unmistakable evidence that he was there (though 1 Peter 5:13 does imply it), early Christian writers such as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Lactantius are unanimous in saying that he went to Rome, presided over the Church there, and was martyred during the Emperor

Nero's persecution.

There was no early writer who claimed that Peter never went to Rome and died elsewhere, and no other ancient city ever claimed to be the place of his death or to have his remains—which makes sense, since in this century it has been demonstrated that his bones lay beneath the high altar of St. Peter's Basilica.

A popular account of the archaeological excavations conducted from 1939 to 1968, at which time Pope Paul VI confirmed that Peter's bones had been scientifically and historically identified, may be found in John E. Walsh's book *The Bones of St. Peter*.

"2. Maryolatry [*sic*] is a hoax."

Quite true. "Mariolatry" means the worship of Mary, giving her the kind of honor due only to God (Greek: *latria*). Since Catholics justifiably give her greater honor than they give other saints, but less than they give to God (and not just less, but a fundamentally different kind of honor), Mariolatry does not exist in Catholic piety. In fact, the Catholic Church forbids Mariolatry because it forbids us to worship anyone other than God himself: "Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God. . . . Idolatry rejects the unique Lordship of God; it is therefore incompatible with communion with God" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2113, cf. 2110–2112, 2114).

But what the author means, of course, is that any honor given to Mary constitutes Mariolatry. He is unable to distinguish mere honor from adoration. One wonders if he thinks people adore as God the judges whom they call "Your Honor," or whether God decrees "parent-olatry" when he commands, "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12).

"3. Purgatory is a hoax. It is a money-making scheme."

If it is, it is one of the least efficient schemes ever devised by man. It is indeed customary to give a priest a small stipend for celebrating a memorial

Mass. The usual amount is five dollars, though there is no obligation to give anything, and many people, out of poverty or ignorance, give nothing. A priest clever enough to operate a scheme for making money would surely be clever enough to choose something that generated a better income, especially since nobody gets rich off of five dollars a day (priests are permitted to accept only one stipend per day). But as far as the Bible is concerned, it's entirely reasonable for a priest to receive some small stipend for guest preaching, baptisms, weddings, and other ministerial functions.

The practice of remunerating ministers for their services, which is certainly not unique to the Catholic Church, is thoroughly biblical. Paul said, "Let the presbyters [priests] who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages'" (1 Tim. 5:17-18; cf. Matt. 10:10; Luke 10:7).

There is no point in examining all the reasons adduced by the writer, but one should not overlook the ninth one:

"9. I am an American citizen and refuse to be the subject of a deluded Italian prince."

He would also, one supposes, refuse to be the subject of a deluded Polish prince. What would his attitude be if an American is someday elected pope?

ON THE FRINGE

In the nineteenth century, there was the anti-Catholic controversialist, Maria Monk, who claimed to have been a nun who "escaped" from a Montreal convent to "tell all" about the immoral escapades of the sisters in the cloister. Although she died in 1849, after having been proved a fraud, her venomous spirit still stalks the land, and her name arises whenever the topic is anti-Catholicism in its more virulent strains.

Those who miss her will be pleased to know that there is a twentieth-century replacement, the late Alberto Rivera, whose life was immortalized in the

pages of several comic books published by Chick Publications of Chino, California.

Rivera claimed to have been a Jesuit priest assigned by the Vatican to infiltrate and subvert Protestant churches, particularly Fundamentalist ones such as the Plymouth Brethren, Pentecostal, Baptist, and United Evangelical churches. He was so effective, he said, that he was secretly made a bishop. But then he saw the light, abandoned Catholicism, and barely escaped with his life.

Although the Christian Research Institute and *Christianity Today* (both Protestant), demonstrated that Rivera was never a priest and never offered any proof for his allegations, the comic books keep popping up and people keep believing Rivera's charges, no matter how ridiculous they are.

One of the juiciest is straight from Maria Monk. Rivera claimed that in the 1930s, the Spanish government, then in the hands of anticlerical parliamentarians, discovered graves of newborn children beneath monasteries and convents. In the first comic book in the series, Rivera included a diagram showing a monastery and convent some distance apart, with steps descending from each into a connecting tunnel, along which are the graves. The diagram includes a little arrow pointing to the tunnel and captioned "bodies of babies." Rivera claimed the children were the result of illicit unions between monks and nuns, and the remainder of the story is easy enough to guess.

THE CASE OF THE MISSING DIRT

What Rivera did not tell us is why the monks and nuns would have gone to all the trouble to dig a tunnel. Why not just slip into regular clothes, leave the monastery or convent late at night, and proceed in the darkness to a rendezvous point? Furthermore, where was all the excavated dirt put, and why didn't the neighbors inquire what all the picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows were for? And so on. The story becomes more improbable as the questions multiply. Of course, Rivera spoke only in generalities. He made no reference to a specific monastery or convent

or to corroborating sources, because there are none.

Despite the patent falsehoods of the comic books, Rivera and Chick Publications have not been disavowed by many "respectable" anti-Catholics. In its newsletter, for instance, Mission to Catholics, International, said that it could not verify Rivera's charges and so could not recommend the comic books—but it would not write off Rivera and his publisher either. As the old saying goes, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

These three examples are not important in themselves, but they illustrate the material professional anti-Catholics produce. Even a brief acquaintance with the literature from Bob Jones University, Mission to Catholics, International, The Conversion Center, and Chick Publications shows that grotesqueries like these are standard fare. These and all the other charges can be demonstrated to be nothing but a mixture of prejudice, ignorance, and faulty scholarship.

NIHIL OBSTAT: I have concluded that the materials presented in this work are free of doctrinal or moral errors.
Bernadeane Carr, STL, 10 August 2004

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+Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego, 10 August 2004

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Anti-Catholicism

