

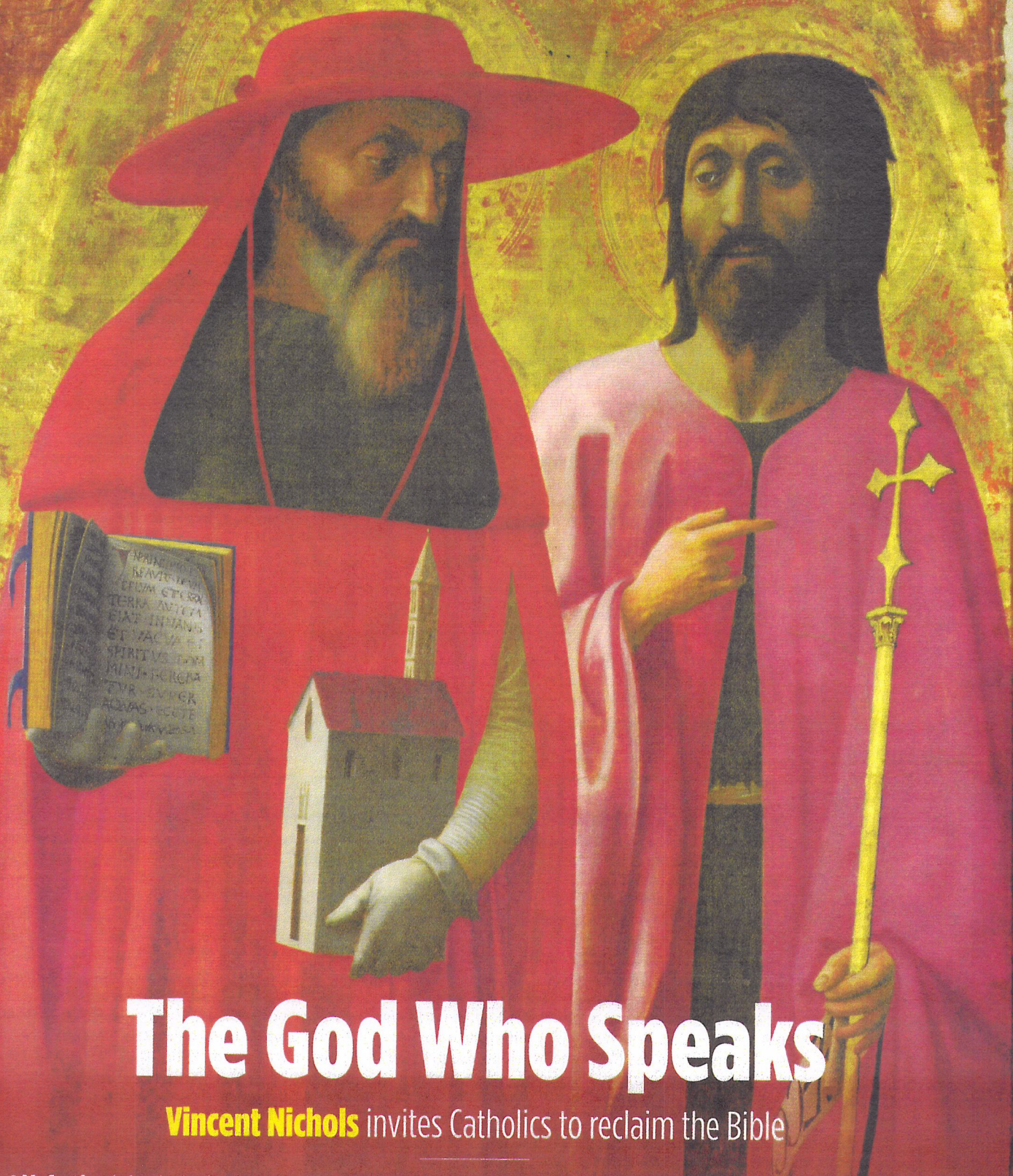
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TABLET



The God Who Speaks

Vincent Nichols invites Catholics to reclaim the Bible

Dermot McCarthy defends the Backstop • **James Alison** is set free by Pope Francis • **Henri Nouwen** learns how to follow Jesus

Carmody Grey wrestles with a sinful Church • **D. J. Taylor** finds Christ among the cowboys

Francis McDonagh anticipates the Amazon Synod • **Ian Thomson** is entranced by a Cavalier composer

PLUS LAURA GASCOIGNE • CHRISTOPHER HOWSE • LUCY IETHBRIDGE • JAMES ROBERTS • OLA TIORPHOM

In this year's international bestseller, *In the Closet of the Vatican*, Frédéric Martel reveals that two years ago Pope Francis phoned a prominent gay priest and theologian ordered by the Vatican not to teach, preach or celebrate the Sacraments. We asked the priest to explain what happened / By JAMES ALISON

'This is Pope Francis...'

I GUESS THE story starts in 1994, when, fully six years a priest, it became clear to me that I could no longer pretend that there was anything wrong with same-sex love. The frightened boy who had accepted the official line that he was the bearer of something objectively disordered, and that therefore celibacy was an obligation, was finally growing up.

With that realisation came a whole series of others, all interlinked. First that any vows or promises undertaken when one party has been lying to the other are null. And in this case, church authority had been lying to me, as it has to so many others, with relation to who we are.

Alas, while individuals like me can repent of the ways we have allowed that lie to form our souls, the Roman congregations have no capacity to discuss or rectify their falsehood, one into which so many of us are co-opted. At the same time I knew that if I wanted to be a theologian (my dream job: seminary professor, like my beloved tutor in Brazil, the late Ulpiano Vázquez Moro SJ), I could only do so by playing along with the lie. And what was the value of being a theologian teaching future priests if both my teaching and example were obliged to lies and silence about who most of us are? Then again, what value does a loyal confessional theologian, but one who tries to tell the truth in this area, have outside ecclesiastical structure? In both cases: zero.

SO ALL WAS loss, and I walked the plank out of the ecclesiastical world which I loved and within which I had hoped to live, and into the sea of "getting a life", slowly wading through breakdown and unemployment, out of the financial infantilism into which we clerical males are so easily inducted. Having become aware that I had been a guest, and not a member, of the Dominicans (for whose teaching, hospitality, and some lifelong friendships I have nothing but gratitude), I wrote to the Congregation for Divine Worship in 1996 telling them my story, explaining to them the nullity of my vows and promises and offering them, if they wished to, to annul my ordination. Eventually, a three-liner arrived confirming the validity of my ordination, but asking me to request laicisation. The form for doing that also required that lies be told, so, on the advice of a canon lawyer, I did nothing, and heard nothing.

Meanwhile, and very slowly, as I overcame the teeth-chattering depressive paralysis into which I fell, and thanks to the encouragement



of lay friends, I began again to become theologically productive. My attempts to meet with bishops or cardinals who might "sort out" my canonical status were invariably rebuffed – more than one alleged it would be imprudent for him to be seen to meet me. Many letters went unanswered. One or two were happy to chat, but frank about not being able to do anything.

MORE THAN 10 YEARS went by, and eventually a tidy-minded Dominican superior asked if I would mind his processing the paperwork dispensing my membership of the order. I had no objections to the result of his process, since as I had long ago explained, my membership was null. But I couldn't participate in the process, since that would require pretending there was something existing from which to be dispensed. Luckily it didn't matter from his end, all he needed was that I receive notification of the process, not my consent to any part of it. With additional kindness, he explained to the powers that be that I alleged reasons of conscience.

Eventually a document came through, confirming that neither the Dominicans nor I had any obligations to each other, and that I was a priest in good standing, without incardination, but available to be incardinated should a bishop be bold enough to have me.

A few years later I found myself living in Brazil, accompanying a fledgling LGBT apostolate. An early missive to the local cardinal met with no reply. Later, he called me in, upset that a newspaper interview I'd given appeared close to an unfortunate op-ed he'd penned to

coincide with Pride. He accepted that the upstaging was not deliberate – I had been out of the country and knew nothing of the paper's plans. Nevertheless, he was quite clear that he wanted me laicised, for which he needed my consent. My consent was not given.

On a subsequent meeting, faced with the same demand, I offered him to incardinate me in the archdiocese if he wanted to (thus giving him some control over me). He immediately refused. Shortly afterwards, now into Francis' papacy, he invoked a recent change in canon law, and initiated a process of forced laicisation. This sort of process was apparently designed to enable bishops to scrub from their lists priests who, without doing the paperwork, had left to get married years previously, and would not answer letters. Not my case at all.

A year or so later, I received a letter from the Congregation of Clergy, in Latin, telling me I had been forcibly removed from clerical status, and was forbidden to teach, preach or preside. And that this was unappealable. Even for someone predisposed to imagine a Kafkaesque quality to Vatican bureaucracy it was shocking to be tangential to a process in which it is unnecessary to inform the one charged of the charges against him, in which no legal representation is permitted, and whose sentence does not require the signature of the sentence. I had some intellectual preparation for the legal niceties and knew that I should not let such violence get to me, nevertheless the Congregation's unequivocal "your priesthood is worth nothing" plunged me into a deep depression.

A FEW MONTHS later, still reeling, I was able to speak to my former novice master, now a bishop, whose reaction was immediate, and more than I could possibly have asked for: "Absurd. It's people like you they need onside at this time. Don't write to the Pope, your letter will never get through. I'll request a private audience and ask him to sort it out."

Eighteen months later, the bishop had his private audience, bearing with him a letter from me appealing what the Congregation had claimed was unappealable. My letter pointed out that the whole process smacked of the "self-referential curialism" that Francis has so often criticised. And that I had been doing exactly what he had publicly encouraged us to do: to evangelise in an existential periphery, and "cause a bit of a stir". In the letter, I exposed my conscience to him: that I could not reconcile what he himself had said in public with the Latin document sent to me in his

name, and was proposing to treat that document as null, and to carry on as before.

I asked Francis, if at all possible, to make my situation regular, not as a personal favour to me, but as part of opening up wider ministerial possibilities in the Church for LGBT people to speak, preach, evangelise, in the first person, no longer bound by the dreaded “they” of clerical dishonesty.

And so, in May 2017, my letter reached the hands of Pope Francis. My friend, the bishop, told me later that the meeting had been extremely warm, the Holy Father sympathetic to my circumstances, and that he had left with the assurance that something would be done. For me this could scarcely have been more exhilarating: an unappealable sentence had in fact been appealed to the highest court. Even if nothing happened, my case would forever be *sub iudice*. I imagined that maybe, in a year or two, I would receive a notification from an aide saying that the matter was being looked into. And I began to breathe.

Merely the fact that my former novice master had thought it worthwhile to cross an ocean and risk his credibility with the Holy Father on my account – what an extraordinary gift! Over this same period I had explained the forced laicisation to a couple of friends who had invited me to give talks and preside. I offered to withdraw from presiding, letting them off the hook of my causing trouble for them. They both immediately and without

question insisted that I do preside; one told me that were I to take the forced laicisation and what had led to it at face value, let alone make it public knowledge, the scandal given by such curial behaviour would be hugely greater than anything I might cause myself.

THEN CAME THE CALL: Sunday 2 July 2017 at about 3 p.m. Him: “*Soy el Papa Francisco*”; Me: “*¿en serio?*”; Him: “*No, en broma hijo*” (“This is Pope Francis”; “Are you serious?”; “No, just joking, son”). But it was he. The Argentinian accent, but more the fact that he knew the content of my letter, and was clearly referring to it as he spoke, clinched for me that this was no prank played by a cruel friend.

And then this: “I want you to walk with deep interior freedom, following the Spirit of Jesus. And I give you the power of the keys. Do you understand? I give you the power of the keys.” I said, “Yes”, though in retrospect, how, in my daze, I thought I had understood the gift is beyond me. The conversation went on, talking with humour, and even a certain piquancy, about friends and acquaintances in common. In the background a hint of lyric opera, which I strained to recognise. After urging me to discretion, not to cause problems for good bishops, he ended with “Pray for me. I’ll look up your dossier and get back to you.”

What does this extraordinary mercy mean, for me, and might it mean for others? At the very least, that the source of canonical order

did not regard as binding his own Congregation’s sentence, since he clearly treated me as priest, giving me universal jurisdiction to hear Confessions (something I believe he also did with the missionaries he sent out for the Jubilee of Mercy).

That he was trusting me to be free to be responsibly the priest that I have spent all these years becoming; that for the first time in my life in the Church I had been treated as an adult by an adult, and, good Lord! It takes the Pope himself to act like that.

More recently I have had the privilege of being able to ask a very distinguished canonist what this means, this immediate act of the Universal Ordinary sending me forth as a sort of clandestine mercy priest. He roared with laughter and said: “Canonically, it makes no sense at all, but ... he does these things!” It was a pleasure to see this top-flight canonist, rather than being worried by this, delighting in the Pope’s freedom. With the suggestion that I am by no means alone in having received a liberating call from a disguised number.

And indeed, what of so many others more deserving than I? What about a Jubilee of Honesty for priests, inaugurated with an amnesty for double lives that are neither abusive nor criminal? A public accountability to honesty, especially of formators, as the principal factor in formation? The closet no longer forming and enforcing the closet? Bishops

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given five years to learn to overcome their inability to discern and to negotiate with people who have real lives, real ministries for the benefit of the real people to whom they are committed? No more talk of “crisis of vocations” – put the emphasis where it is: a crisis of discernment kept going by those who have locked themselves into a self-reinforcing system of mendacity and thrown away the key.

Thirty years a priest, and it feels as though only now is my ordination kicking in. Having received, in addition, such freedom, how now should I exercise a ministry? With whom and for whom? In what good ways to be accountable, and to whom? Pope Francis has talked about this being a change of epoch rather than an epoch of change. What is going to be the shape of ministry in the Church that is being birthed? What is the form and style of teaching? These are, thank heaven, up in the air in ways I could never have imagined when as a frightened and classically-minded youth I lay prostrate before a bishop on a cold floor in 1988, full of intellectual certainty, hoping for some emotional security to match: and instead received from the Holy Spirit a 30-year blast into adulthood.

James Alison is a priest, theologian, lecturer, retreat giver and itinerant preacher. When not on the road, he lives in Madrid. He turns 60 on the feast of St Francis, 4 October.
