



The author of the science fiction classics *The Sparrow* and *Children of God* reflects on the papacy of Francis I.

# Jesuits in Space And in the Vatican

By MARY DORIA RUSSELL, MA, PhD

*Old joke. A Franciscan, a Dominican and a Jesuit are having dinner one night. Suddenly the lights go out.*

*The Franciscan says, "Let us welcome Sister Darkness and wait patiently for Brother Sunlight to return."*

*The Dominican says, "God gives us darkness of ignorance so that we might, by contrast, discern the light of truth."*

*The Jesuit gets a flashlight and goes downstairs to flip the breaker.*

I'm not a Catholic, but that's the kind of practical, pragmatic "just do it" attitude that brought the Jesuits to mind on the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the New World.

On October 12, 1992, a serious Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) began at the Arecibo Radio Telescope in Puerto Rico. I asked myself, what would happen if we really heard something? What if we picked up incontestable evidence that there were other sentient species in the universe? And what if it were possible to go there? Who would attempt the mission?

It would take an international organization with scientific expertise, the money to back the mission and a compelling motive to go. What about a group with a 500-year history of making first contact?

What about the Jesuits?

During the Age of Discovery, Jesuit priests were never more than a year or two behind other Europeans making initial contact with previously

unknown peoples; indeed, Jesuits were often the vanguard of exploration. And what could be a more compelling motive than the desire of Jesuit scientists to know and love God's other children?

So, that's how my science fiction novels *The Sparrow* and *Children of God* got started. They're about Jesuits in space, making first contact with God's other children on an alien planet.

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Fast-forward 22 years.

When the stunningly improbable papacy of Francis I was announced, I got congratulatory emails from readers around the world, as if I had somehow predicted this turn of events.

Actually, I had predicted an African pope, not a South American, and my Gelasius III certainly wasn't a Jesuit. I try to keep my novels realistic.

Jesuits sometimes serve as bishops in what used to be called mission lands, and in old age, esteemed Jesuits have sometimes been raised to



Illustration by Mikey Burton



the cardinalate, but those are exceptions to the rule. Jesuits actually take a vow to forgo ecclesiastical dignities. A Jesuit pope wasn't impossible, but it was about as likely as the mayor of Toledo, Ohio, going straight to the White House.

Fiction has to be plausible. Real life? Not so much.

And here we are in the real-life future, when the College of Cardinals has elected a Jesuit pope whose predecessor was choppered into retirement at Castel Gandolfo. Which, in case you were wondering, is not actually named after a Tolkien character. Trust me on that. I do a lot of research for my books.

The papacy of Francis I is so astonishingly unprecedented, it seemed apocalyptic to some of the Catholic Church's more excitable children. There are those who believe St. Malachy prophesied in 1143 that Francis I will be the last pontiff. They're pretty convinced that the end of the world is nigh.

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More than a year has passed. The apocalypse tarries, but Pope Francis continues to make global headlines. He has enthralled the world, much as the current Dalai Lama has over the years: simply by being a manifestly nice guy. Good-natured. Humble. Compassionate. Funny and self-deprecating.

Francis carries his own suitcase, remarking, "It's normal to carry a bag when traveling! We have to get used to this being normal for a pope."

The world swoons.

Francis turns down the lavish, if lonely, papal apartments in favor of a perfectly nice room in the Vatican guest house where he can share meals with others.

The world smiles.

Francis removes from office Germany's notorious Bishop of Bling, who spent \$43 million renovating his mansion. Prelates around the world are shamed into giving up lavish digs.

The world applauds.

"It breaks my heart," Francis says, "to see a priest or nun with the latest model of car. Cars are necessary, but take a more humble one! Think of how many children die of hunger." The pope's own ride is a Ford Focus.

The world sighs with admiration.

Asked about homosexuals in the clergy, Fran-

cis replies, "If a gay person seeks God, who am I to judge?"

The world is amazed. Seriously? Did he really just say that? Wow.

Francis publicly embraces people with severe disfigurements and deformities. "He is teaching us about looking at the Other as Jesus looks at them: with tenderness, kindness and love," says

**It's only been a year, the world admits. We'll cut Francis some slack for now. But the question remains. Can this personable, good-hearted pope bring about genuine reform or just ... rebranding?**

Jean Vanier, founder of an international federation where people with and without disabilities live and work together in community.

The world wipes a tear from its eye. What a guy!

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According to the Pew Research Center, positive comments about Francis outnumbered negative ones on the Internet by 5 to 1 during his first year. This pope is a rock star, and he's got the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine to prove it.

But as his papacy goes forward, Francis will have to lift things heavier than his suitcase.

"Women in the church are more important than bishops and priests," he has declared, "just as Mary is more important than the apostles."

That's nice. Mother's Day is nice, too, but respect year-round is better. And what about divorce? Remarriage? Birth control?

The church, Francis says, "must act decisively to root out and punish pedophile priests." Measures must be taken "to protect minors and to help those who have suffered violence in the past."

OK, but will records be turned over to police? Are priestly pedophiles going to do time? And what about the cover-ups?

Sometimes the devil really is dancing in the details. There are decades, if not centuries, of scandal that can no longer be hidden. The breathtaking evil perpetrated by Marcial Maciel Degollado and the Legionaries of Christ has been luridly exposed. The glaring hypocrisy of clerics



who preach celibacy while practicing promiscuity has been uncovered, filmed and broadcast on PBS, no less. The corruption of the Vatican bank, and the involvement of the members of the Curia in Mafia money-laundering, is oozing into the light.

Historically, revolutionaries fare better than reformers. Rip the past away and you can leap into the future while people are still gasping at the speed of change. Reformers, by contrast, chip away at the past, bit by bit. Reformers give those who fear change plenty of time to prepare opposition and to counter every move. Meanwhile, those who yearn for decisive change are disappointed. Fond hopes and expectations are dashed. Cynicism sets in.

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Another question, equally important: will the world's admiration for Francis go beyond fandom?

As St. Ignatius Loyola, founder to the Jesuit order, wrote, "Love in action is preferred to love in words." To put it plainer: talk is cheap. What are you prepared to do?

There is a long and honorable Catholic tradition of preference for the poor, the sick, the despised. It started with Jesus of Nazareth and has been carried on, generation after generation, by those who take his teaching seriously.

To date, Pope Francis has directed much of his scolding at Curia careerists and Vatican hypocrites, but there have been clear signs that he will become insistent about drawing the world's attention toward the beam in its own eye. Already, he

has decried rampant consumerism and the modern "throw-away culture." He has denounced unbridled capitalism, "the idolatry of money," and "the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose."

Perhaps some people have made quiet changes in their own lives in response to the pope's calls for social and economic justice. Maybe somebody somewhere bought a little car or settled for a more modest house and gave the leftover cash to charity. But the loudest response came from those who clutched their wallets and cried, "Francis is a Marxist!"

Clean-up operations at the Vatican are well and good, and long overdue. Still, I think it's fair to say that the first Jesuit papacy will be judged by the degree to which Francis can transmute his personal charm into food, shelter, education and dignity for the poor, the sick, the delinquent, the marginalized.

Can he do it? He's a Jesuit. I have no doubt that he will try.

To the watching world, I say this: Don't just wish him well. Help.

**MARY DORIA RUSSELL** is an award-winning physical anthropologist and an award-winning novelist. Topics for her fiction have ranged from human contact with extraterrestrial life on Alpha Centauri to the lives of Doc Holliday, Wyatt Earp and other historical figures of the American West. Among her many literary achievements, two of her books, *Doc* and *A Thread of Grace*, were nominated for Pulitzer prizes. Her novel *Epitaph*, about the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, will be published in March 2015. Russell and her husband live in Cleveland.

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