

Francis I & Leo XIV

Our most modest Popes



MARC SCIBILIA has been all over Instagram in recent weeks singing about death and the afterlife in his lovely song, *More To This*. The song is about the deep mystery of love, dying, and oblivion. Mystery has been uppermost in the minds of BBC news editors too; they have come over all Roman Catholic. It started with the death of Pope Francis when the corporation decided to emphasize the modesty of the old chap as his body was brought to the public's gaze in its plain zinc-lined coffin amid the splendours of the Vatican. Not for him the raised catafalque – he was

the 'People's Pope'. Of course, the mystic fans, the triple tiara, and the red shoes, all disappeared during the reign of previous popes. However, Frances was assiduous in his modest bearing and dress.

I thought this odd, because I cannot see the point of a modest monarch, after all that's exactly what the Pope is – a head of state, an emperor, with a worldwide reach and appeal. Elected in an eleventh-century ritual, enlivened in the nineteenth with the theatrical addition of white and black smoke issuing from a specially installed chimney. The Pope is the guardian of the many mysteries which keep parish priests whispering their undoubted truths and certainties, revealing the virtual presence of Christ at the mass, while assuring us all of the love of God, and the promise everlasting life.

In truth, there can be nothing modest about the Church of Rome; its insistence that it guards and perpetuates the sacred mysteries make nonsense of any show of humility.

Now, as a Roman Catholic atheist I do have a particular axe to grind. It has got nothing to do with child abuse, nor the fierce Sister Gertrude who took me through the rhetorical questions of the catechism, nor even the crimes of the Church against astronomers, Jews, women, and homosexuals. No, that catalogue is far too long to bother about – it's the mysteries insisted upon by the Pope and his Cardinals that worry me.

Despite much argy-bargy there is no evidence from the supposed 'time of Christ' that the chap ever existed at all. Or, that king *Herod the Great* ordered the massacre of the 'first born' at the time of Christ's birth – no mention of this extraordinary event was recorded in Rome, or anywhere else for that matter. Then there's the 'wedding at Cana' where Christ turned the water into wine, and went on to save a "woman taken in adultery". Christ is supposed to have done a lot of marvellous things, including defying Satan's temptations in the desert.

In any event, there were no doubt a lot of Jewish agitators making an impression, and trouble, in one way or another for the Roman Empire in the First Century. Some were probably flogged and crucified. However, even though we know that Pontius Pilate, was the Governor of Judaea (26-27AD), yet neither Christ nor his execution, got a mention in despatches to Rome.

Ordinary miracles and good deeds aside, the claim that Christ “rose from the dead” is surely absurd. This, of course, is a key article of faith without which Christianity and the Papacy is impossible. Christ was the Son of God, and when he left his mortal form, he vacated the tomb in preparation for his journey to His Father in Heaven above. One must believe this; one must believe that Christ rose from the dead in order to be a Christian – Roman Catholic or otherwise.

Acceptance of this absurdity is of a piece with believing in God. Roman Catholic theologians insist that their faith is rational, and it is, the moment you surrender to the idea of an all-powerful, all loving God who hates the sin that we’re all born with, and needs the Church to help us atone for our fallen condition. The moment we allow faith to shroud our reason in the mysteries curated and supervised by priests we have, perhaps paradoxically, lost our reason.



I cannot prove the non-existence of God or produce evidence against the resurrection of Christ from the dead. However, I can adduce a raft of reasons for thinking that the idea of God is radically improbable, and the bizarre notion that Christ rose from the dead is nonsensical. Consequently, the entire mission of the Pope, the Papacy, and Roman Catholicism, is denuded of spiritual purpose, and exists only to perpetuate a profoundly reactionary institution, fully in lock-step with Orthodox Judaism, Islam, and a number of other faiths, that demand the paradoxical suspension of reason, in order to promote the reasonableness of their faith.

I describe myself as a Roman Catholic atheist because I recognise the part played in my life by the gorgeous theatre of Catholicism. I continue to be profoundly moved by the rigmarole of the mass, by the candles and the holy smoke, by the singing and incantations. Above all by the medieval iconography of suffering that the tradition has bequeathed to us.

In addition, it is a fact, that I think undeniable, that it is impossible to imagine our civilisation, its underlying assumptions, its belief in the intrinsic value of every human being, the distinction between Church and state, without Biblical Judaism and the historical struggles of Christians to elaborate and to bear witness to these and other abiding truths.

However, it is imperative that we are not swept along like the BBC to implicitly embrace the faithful unreason which frames the Roman Catholic conception of reason. For God did not create the world, oblivion is certain for us all.

There is only Marc Scibilia's, *More To This*, if we realise our lives in the struggle to boldly and collectively make creative sense of our situation free from the medieval hocus pocus on offer by priests, Cardinals, and Popes – even modest ones.