

# Bank of conspiracies

## The Last Supper

Philip Willan

CONSTABLE AND ROBINSON, £8.99

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The discovery in 1982 of the body of Roberto Calvi, hanging from scaffolding under Blackfriars Bridge days before the Banco Ambrosiano collapsed, started a scandal that inspired several books. Philip Willan, who was a respected *Guardian* correspondent in Italy, has dug more deeply into the mystery of the death of "God's banker" than his predecessors, tracking down key figures from Licio Gelli, the self-styled "Grand Master" of Italy's banned P2 Masonic lodge, to Archbishop Marcinkus, the former head of the Vatican Bank.

Calvi was desperate when he fled Italy in June 1982. "His bank was in financial trouble, he had serious legal problems and he had to find \$300 million with which to pay the Vatican Bank by the end of the month," Willan writes. In his last days, Calvi sought to blackmail associates, including the Vatican, "the very institution he had served with such devotion over decades".

Willan describes how Pope John Paul II was confronted by the repercussions of the scandal. The Vatican Bank, the Institute for Religious Works (IOR) "risked financial ruin for its failure to rein in the piratical business practices of men like Calvi, who acted on its behalf". Giacomo Botta, an Ambrosiano official who helped to manage the bank's overseas network, told Willan there were reasons why the IOR was the senior partner, if not the owner, of Ambrosiano. Alessandro Mennini, son of IOR managing director Luigi Mennini, joined Ambrosiano unexpectedly, as a deputy director, despite an almost total lack of banking experience, for example. Whatever the case, in 1987 Italian magistrates issued a warrant for the arrest of Archbishop Marcinkus for complicity with Calvi in the Ambrosiano bankruptcy. He never stood trial because Italy's cassation court ruled that Italian courts had no jurisdiction over officers of the bank.

A Catholic writer with a deep knowledge of Italy, Willan demonstrates an understanding of the Holy See that distinguishes his book from others on the subject which have been simply crude attacks on the Church. He rightly pours scorn on the clumsy way that Calvi's death initially was investigated by the City of London Police and the rushed original inquest claiming Calvi committed suicide.

In 1983, equally slipshod Italian authorities disregarded information from an informant who attempted to blow the whistle on Sergio Vaccari, an international drug dealer whom investigators now believe may have played a key role in organising Calvi's murder and who was found stabbed

to death in London in September 1982. A second coroner's inquest on Calvi's death in 1983 recorded an open verdict. The murder hypothesis gained official recognition in 1988 when a Milan court ordered Calvi's life insurer to pay his family.

The Banco Ambrosiano was founded by a priest, Giuseppe Tovini, in 1896, to provide financial services to Catholic institutions in Lombardy. Calvi joined the bank in 1947 and became a modernising chairman in 1975. Calvi's widow, Clara, told how the family bought a house in the Bahamas; Archbishop Marcinkus, who died in 2006, and Michele Sindona, the Sicilian financier, both stayed there. Anna, Calvi's daughter, recalls her father living in a climate of fear, surrounding himself with bodyguards and dubious advisers and travelling by bullet-proof car. Both women believe the banker had a plan to stave off bankruptcy by bringing in Opus Dei to wipe out debts in the tangled relationship between the IOR and the Ambrosiano. If the deal was not concluded, Calvi told Anna, the IOR would collapse and would bring down the Ambrosiano in its fall. "If this happened the Vatican would be forced to sell off St Peter's Square ..."

Willan is outstanding in pursuit of holes in the investigation. His account of the cast

of colourful rogues in the affair makes gripping reading. The book's title refers to a meal the banker had with his presumed murderers at an Italian restaurant in Knightsbridge shortly before his death. In 2002 a senior City police officer, Det. Supt Trevor Smith, re-examined the case and found a catalogue of errors including failing to preserve the knot attaching the rope to the scaffolding. The blunders raised the question whether Calvi's murderers were protected by a Masonically influenced force.

Earlier this year five people charged with complicity in Calvi's murder were acquitted for lack of evidence; prosecutors intend to appeal. Willan examines evidence that Calvi's destiny may also have been linked to Italian terrorism and the murder of Gerald Bull, the engineer shot dead in 1990 after designing a long-range "super gun" for Saddam Hussein, and suggestions that the Falklands war, as well as Cosa Nostra, had a bearing on Calvi's death. Occasionally the exhaustive exploration of so many potential conspiracies is overwhelming, suggesting the author was constrained by a scramble to publish as the Italian murder trial ended. But this powerfully written account will be required reading for students of recent Italian and Vatican history. **John Phillips**

## LENT READING IN BRIEF

**Thirst for Life: reflections on the Scripture readings for Lent 2008** by Chris Chivers and others (DLT, £4.95). This year's Cafod/Christian Aid Lent book is a compact collection of reflections on the readings for Lent: each day's material is divided into a reflection on the Scripture passages for the day, a thought for the day and a short prayer. Whether the theme is the honesty required to meet the God of Ash Wednesday, or the need to let go and trust, this is a book that constantly makes the connection between a personal relationship with God and a response to the injustice of the world. Its approach is refreshingly down to earth, reassuring us that reflection and action, however small, do count. *Tablet* price £4.50.

**A Turning to God** by Cardinal Basil Hume (DLT, £9.95). Scripture readings and a short prayer for each day of Lent, compiled by the editor Patricia Hardcastle Kelly, accompany this collection of excerpts from largely unpublished homilies and addresses by the late Cardinal Basil Hume. Hume homes in on the kernel of each passage, teasing out its practical meaning. On suffering, sin, acceptance and the presence of God, he speaks with love and conviction, appealing to the seed of faith buried in the reader. This is a voice of wise and prayerful simplicity, of unassuming holiness. The book is above all a guide that will help to deepen the reader's day-by-day pondering of each passage. *Tablet* price £9.

**Nine Faces of God** by Peter Hannan SJ (Columba Press, £9.99). This new, revised edition of a practical and deeply felt book articulates the different aspects of the love of God in nine ways inspired by the Enneagram. It draws the reader into what Hannan describes as the primary objective of prayer: to become more aware of the love of God. At the heart of the book is a call to a shift of emphasis from loving to being loved, a shift for which humble faith is needed. This collation of biblical imagery on the nature of God takes a comprehensive and very human approach that invites us to let prayer be true and deep. *Tablet* price £9.

**Adam's Dream: human longings and the love of God** by Keith Jones (Mowbray, £10.99). "Adam's dream", a phrase from a letter by the poet Keats as he remembers Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is the hope for happiness, the spark from which faith is lit. The first chapter of Genesis, setting out how the world ought to be, is echoed in music in Haydn's cheerful oratorio *The Creation*. From here, Jones, who is the Dean of York, moves to how the world actually is, with the story of Adam and Eve and that of Job. Loosely following the liturgy of Lent, the book gives apt voice to the perceived hiatus between human misery and the longed-for fulfilment of Adam's dream. *Tablet* price £10. **Rima Devereaux**

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