

scrupulous foreigner ogling their *palazzi* on the Grand Canal (“What if it was *your* house?!”). And so on down to the final scene, in which the jester discovers his daughter felled by the vengeful blow he had sought to direct at her presumed seducer:

*Gilda! Mia Gilda! . . . È morta! . . .  
Ah, la maledizione!  
(Strappandosi i capelli, cade sul cadavere della figlia.)*

Ah, the curse! (And, tearing at his hair, he falls upon the breathless body.) This is just how a Venetian of ancient lineage feels about the unforeseen outcome of a quarrel with an intransigent plumber or an avaricious plasterer. *Miei pavimenti!* My floors! (Only a barely audible creaking by way of reply.) *Miei stucchi!* My ceiling reliefs! (Waterlogged.) *Le cose della mamma!* Mommy’s things! (Sold at auction by the wastrel uncle.) Because the truth, which every charlatan beginning with Freud has made a living obfuscating, is that any human trait can work backward as well as forward. While a Viennese psychiatrist may well want to sleep in his mother’s canopied bed because it reminds him of his mother, a Venetian gentleman is far more likely to want to sleep with his mother because she reminds him of her canopied bed.

Given such intensity of natural feeling, suggesting that it may be rather easier to check into a Three-Star Kraut Excelsior & Rooms in Mantua with the virgin Gilda under the name of “Mr. & Mrs. Bill Gates” than to rent her father’s apartment in Venice on an honorable one-year, tourist-accommodation lease, it is hardly surprising that when I look at a piazza in Rome, a street in Milan, or, as now, a stretch of the Amalfi coastline, all I can really see is so much easily rentable, emotionally neutral lodging. The house on the Grand Canal, or more specifically the filet-mignon portion of it called the *piano nobile*, is all the Venetian *nobil homo* has in this world. It is the habitation of his dignity. To him, the house is a machine for feeling.

An added complication is that Venice—though more cosmopolitan, both by tradition and in actual fact, than all the rest of the great Italian cities—is a small town where everybody knows everything about everyone else, and literally none of it is ever remotely true. I say this advisedly. As a Russian, I am used to treating rumor and gossip as alternative

channels of information, more trustworthy, if anything, than official news bulletins and press reports. As it happens, the local paper, *Il Gazzettino*, has just astonished Venice with the news that the American owner of the Palazzo Persico, directly across the Grand Canal from the Mocenigo, “rents out”—has rented? would rent? is thinking of renting? has had a dream in which she was going to rent? Italian syntax goes all coy at this juncture—“her *piano nobile* for \$60,000 a month.” From this one may easily draw the mistaken conclusion that no rumor, and no gossip, can possibly be as false as what gets printed in newspapers.

In my childhood, we laughed at the question of whether it was true that a certain Armenian had won a million in the state lottery. The answer was: “Yes, it is true. But it wasn’t in the state lottery, it was at cards, and it wasn’t a million, it was a hundred roubles, and he didn’t win, he lost.” Whether the nice Mrs. Press rents out her apartment for \$60,000, or \$6,000, or \$600 a month, there is still at least an element of truth in the *Gazzettino* story, whereas the things one hears at dinner at the Circolo, the gentlemen’s club where the city elders doze over their Camparis, are total, blinding, Byzantine inventions.

“Countess M— has run off with a Colombian drug baron. The count has eczema, caused, I happen to know, by a bad oyster he once ate in Monte Carlo. Later this year he will be going to Switzerland for prolonged specialist treatment. You should speak to his nephew in Milan, who is an important publisher of books on the history of dance, and he will almost certainly let you have the apartment.” Now the truth is that the nephew, a banker in New York, has not been to Italy since the age of three; that it was back in 1959 that the countess left her husband for an English racecar driver; and that the 82-year-old count, eczema or no eczema, is happily ensconced in his ancestral *palazzo* in the company of a raven-haired Brazilian dancer named Miu, whom he found through an Internet singles site. By the time you unravel the knot and follow up the lead, the old man drowns in his bath, Miu turns blonde, and the apartment is rented to a RAI television executive.

Byzantine indeed. “The worst,” as Byron noted of the people of Greece in whose service he was about to lay down his life,

is that (to use a coarse but the only

expression that will not fall far short of the truth) they are such damned liars; there never was such an incapacity for veracity shown since I’ve lived in Paradise. One of them found fault the other day with the English language, because it had so few shades of a Negative, whereas a Greek can so modify a “No” to a “Yes” and *vice versa*, by the slippery qualities of his language, that prevarication may be carried to any extent and still leave a loop-hole. . . . This was the gentleman’s own talk, and is only to be doubted because in the words of the syllogism “Now Epimenides was a Cretan.”

I suppose the moral of the story is that, after a year or two at the Palazzo Mocenigo, a man should go off and fight for Greek independence, especially if his lease has run out.

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## Letter From Maryland

by Brian Kirkpatrick

### Liberty and License



A recent article in the *Baltimore Sun* gave a wonderful example of how the media view traditional Christianity. Under the headline “Vatican Orders Activists’ Silence,” the *Sun* presented the latest installment in a local saga that is beginning to rival one of the national soap operas in its duration.

In the 1970’s, a Catholic priest and a nun started a ministry targeted at homosexual men and lesbians. It took the Vatican administrative machinery many years of discussion to reach a decision, but last year the two were ordered to stop their work. The *Sun* story concerned a recent meeting in Rome, at which the two were further instructed not to talk about the ministry or the reasons for its termination. If they broke the ban, they faced dismissal from the religious life: She would no longer be a nun; he would

be laicized.

The priest bowed to the discipline of his order. The nun, however, flouted her instructions, telling reporters that the gag order was “a violation of the basic human right to self-defense.” She added, “The part that I think is particularly unfair is to say to someone, ‘You are forbidden to speak about this experience.’ How else are we to grow as a church, as individuals or as a community unless we can speak about and reflect on our experiences? That part I found particularly offensive.” One cannot appreciate the humor of her remark without knowing that the process of bringing the two into line with Church teachings took 11 years, during which the nun vigorously defended herself both within the Church and in public. The Church finally decided that there had been enough talk, and it was time for the two to do as they were told. Any parent of a quick-tongued adolescent should be able to sympathize with the Church’s stance: Sometimes, enough is enough.

The rest of the article also resembled the skillful imitation of an outraged teenager. A woman from Dignity USA, a homosexual pressure group, said, “To force them to make a choice between their life in community and their call to ministry is a kind of abuse.” A former co-worker of the two called the Vatican’s move a “cover-up,” and added, “I can’t help but to ask, ‘What is it the Vatican is afraid of?’” (Ah, *now* I see: It was nothing but fear all along.)

Characteristically, the *Baltimore Sun* presented no rebuttal to the view that the Vatican was wrong and cruel. I presume that the reporters involved in this story, like those they quoted, have chosen to ignore the fact that no “human right” has been violated; the two can speak about their situation all they wish, and no jail, no fine, no worldly punishment will descend on them. If they wish to continue their ministry, they can do so. However, what these two cannot do is defy the discipline of the Church and violate its beliefs while continuing to function as a Catholic priest and nun.

A view of this comedy that those who do not hate all religion might understand is that this is not an issue of rights, but of keeping a contract. (I make this argument with great ambivalence, as it avoids the substantive issues that are involved. But a contractual argument might succeed in the arena in which our arguments are now conducted.) When someone joins a voluntary association—and

membership in the Catholic Church is voluntary—he agrees to follow the rules. Both the nun and the priest knew when they entered the religious life that the Church took its rules seriously. Moreover, in the Catholic Church, the hierarchy sets the rules: What they decide is binding. It’s not a democracy. If conscience dictates that those decisions cannot be followed, you are free to leave; sometimes, perhaps, you should do so, but fundamentally a deal is a deal. The priest is keeping his side of the bargain. The nun refuses to do so.

American Catholics frequently say such things as “The Church can’t do that” or “It’s my Church, too.” One could reply, “It isn’t yours, it’s Christ’s,” but, of course, the dissident would respond that he knows the mind of Christ better than the Church does; and, in the past, there have been dissidents who, the Church has finally concluded, did in fact know better. However, the Church has listened to this priest and the nun for quite some time and has decided they are wrong.

Americans today are frequently confused about authority. Usually we despise it, and many of our woes stem from our refusal to exercise it when it is needed. We construe everything as a matter of rights, by which we often mean some kind of license. But when we choose to belong to an institution, we owe it things in return for membership. (Socrates had something to say about this.) Sometimes we may owe silence; at times, even an American may owe someone obedience. These reasonable points escape this nun, the *Sun*, and many others with an adolescent mindset of rebellion.

What many Americans, including this nun, cannot understand is that some hierarchies take themselves seriously: The leaders of the Catholic Church intend to follow Her rules and enforce them. Fear does not motivate them; sincerity does. They are not trying to “cover up” something; they are trying to maintain the integrity of their organization. An institution’s authorities may assert their power not because they are cruel or because they want to exercise power over other people, but out of devotion to the institution, the people in it, and even, sometimes, their love of God as they understand Him. Rather like good parents.

If this farce evolves in the way such things so often do, the next step will be a federal court. There, the nun’s claims about freedom of speech might conflict

with freedom of religion: Do traditional believers have the right to run their own organization? In a country in which the Boy Scouts narrowly escaped being forced to accept gay leaders because the organization is a “public accommodation,” I fear that, in the courts, this issue would move in the wrong direction.

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## Letter From Croatia

by Tomislav Sunic

### Changing of the Guard



The birth of modern Croatia was closely tied to the paternalistic image of one man: Franjo Tudjman. A self-described nationalist and anticommunist, Tudjman ruled over Croatia for ten years until his death in December 1999. In January 2000, presidential and parliamentary elections brought to power a motley crew of reformed communists, liberals, and globalists. The new leftist government does not make any secret of its desire to reforge links with the former Yugoslav republics and to secure entry into the European Union. It has demonstrated its desire to cooperate by participating in the American-sponsored “Balkan Stability Pact” that seeks to establish friendly ties among all countries in the region.

The new government was welcomed by Western apostles of global free trade and multiculturalism. Its landslide electoral victory demonstrated that the Croatian people wanted change—even at the expense of their national sovereignty. The widespread opinion among most Croats is that their country is now poised to join the opulent West.

Upon taking power, the new government declared that “Croatia will make a radical departure from the Tudjmanesque nationalist, authoritarian, and isolationist past.” Both Prime Minister Ivica Racan and President Stipe Mesic are determined to turn Croatia into a model of good democratic behavior. With the full blessing of the European Union and the “international community,” Croatia’s leaders now lecture neigh-