

F.C. Delius

THE POPE'S LEFT HAND

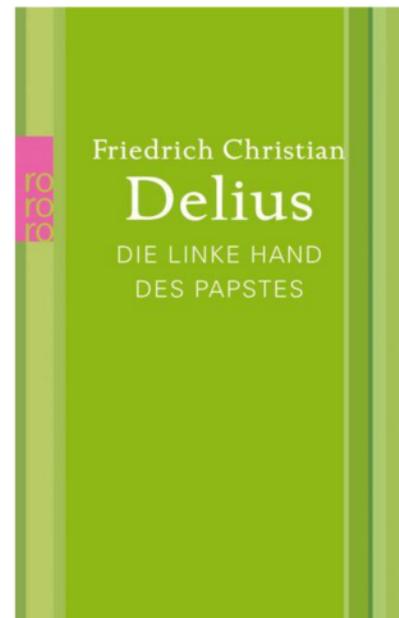
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Rome, 2011. A German archaeologist and tour guide discovers the Pope in a Protestant church, and is engulfed in a whirlwind of questions: when does the Pope's hand move and when does it stay still? Why did Gaddafi send Berlusconi 30 Berber horses, and why is Rome such a popular destination for Germans when they're seen there as barbarians, thanks to the Goths, the Landsknechts and the Nazis? A female Catholic from Cologne wants to be an archbishop, a murderer gives away the Pantheon, rats run over the Via Veneto... The tour guide steps nimbly through the backstreets of Rome as he does through its long history, along the way praising the Italian art of saying 'yes' and 'no' at the same time. This new story by Friedrich Christian Delius is a rhetorical tour-de-force, a brilliantly constructed examination of present day Rome in all its mysterious, dark glory, which depicts a modern legend: just how did the Pope become a Lutheran?



Friedrich Christian Delius was born in Rome in 1943 and grew up in Central Germany. He did his doctoral thesis in German studies in 1970 and subsequently worked as book editor. Today he divides his time between the Italian capital and Berlin. Some of his best-known works are *Ribbeck's Pears* (1991), *The Sunday I Became World Champion* (1994), *The Walk from Rostock to Syracuse* (1995), *My Year as a Murderer* (2004) and *Portrait of Mother as a Young Woman* (2006). Delius has won numerous awards, most recently the German Critics' Prize, the Joseph Breitbach Prize and the Georg-Büchner-Prize.

- Rights sold to Serbia – Zavet
- English sample translation available
- Recommended by New Books in German (Goethe Institute; translation grant)
- Delius' previous titles sold more than 270.000 copies.
- Rights for Delius' previous titles were sold to 18 countries, amongst others: Brazil, France, Great Britain, Greece, Japan, the Netherlands and the Arabic world (Jordan)

Rome 2011. A German archeologist and tour guide accidentally comes upon the pope in a Protestant church and indulges in a whirlwind of questions and thoughts: when does the pope's hand twitch? When he sees the ruling scoundrel? Why does the dictator of Libya entertain the Italian head of state with thirty Berber horses? And why did Augustine have to bribe the Roman emperor with eighty Numidian stallions to gain acceptance for the doctrine of original sin? Why is Rome a dream destination for Germans, even though—ever since the Teutonic invasions, the mercenary knight plunderers, and the Nazi occupiers—they have been considered the worst sort of barbarians there? A Catholic in Cologne would like to be archbishopess, a murderer makes a gift of the Pantheon, rats run around on the Via Veneto. The tour guide looks behind the Rome of postcards, roams through history, and extols the Italian art of saying yes and no at the same time.

At once a tale of the enigmatic, magnificent, profound Rome of today and of a modern legend: how the pope became a Lutheran.

Friedrich Christian Delius

The Pope's Left Hand

Translated by Robert A. Cantrick

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“Since you can never know the truth about Rome, I hope the reader will forgive me for making a few brief observations.”

—Stendhal, *Roman Walks*

The hand, I thought, on that first Sunday in March of 2011—what is it about the hand? Open, slightly curved, relaxed, hanging from the black sleeve, the fingers loosely beside each other, white and soft, what does the pope's hand do when it's doing nothing? We spectators hear much about this man, whether we want to or not, his faces, his robes, the windows that serve as his stages are shown constantly, every Sunday you can hear him sing, speak, and bless, every day, thousands want to be filmed or photographed with him, he is quoted everywhere, his violet smile is sold on postcards, his power implored, sought, questioned, his role is loved, valued, or despised—but his hands, we know nothing about his hands, what is it about the hands?

No, I was not surprised to see him so near, a few meters to my right, almost beside me, in the last row of the sanctuary, the elderly gentleman who by general agreement is called the pope. He was dressed simply, not

in the regalia that proclaims his authority, no gold shone, no lilac, no purple, his head, known the world over, was neither adorned with an imposing miter nor covered with a cap, he looked like a simple parson or a bishop in civilian attire with a black suit and stiff, white collar. To his right and left sat two priests—whom you might have seen near him on TV—in similarly neutral, plain clothing. Gestures, looks, posture, everything studied. The only annoying thing was that the three black-clad men were doing nothing and did not move forward, into the center, where they would be more visible.

Sitting in the same row with them, the aisle between us, my perspective was not the best. Since I did not want to make a spectacle of myself by gawking and tried to turn my head to the right as little as possible, I could peer over only discreetly, and I saw the familiar face only fleetingly and in profile, between the faces of his escorts, six or seven meters away. That is why my eyes turned more toward his hands, the left one mainly, the one closer to me, on his thigh, on his knee, on the backrest, supporting

his head, the right one was completely visible only when the old gentleman moved that arm and reached forward a bit. The hands drew my gaze, the presumed tiredness of old yet still-powerful hands was what I began to contemplate. And the inactivity, to which they were perhaps not accustomed, for once, exceptionally, not being used for one of the centuries-old rituals of his office and exalted position, not raised in greeting or to bless, not pressing other hands, inking signatures, turning book pages, praying, holding wafers or liturgical vessels. The resting hands, the pausing hands, the hands of a so-called infallible, unemployed for these few minutes, they invited me, they provoked me to reflect, they enticed me to discover the secret, if in fact there was a secret, that made them hang so noticeably soft and limp from a stiff body. They asked me riddles.

They seduced me to palm reading from a distance, you would be right to reproach me for that. But what else is a respectable heretic to do if he is afflicted neither with the blindness of the kneeling nor the arrogance of the church

hater? What else is there for an archeologist in early retirement, who occasionally hires himself out as tour guide, when, by whatever odd combination of coincidences, he has the opportunity to observe a pope at close range? When he can quietly savor the anecdotal moment, not knowing whether the encounter will last half a minute, half an hour, or longer?

A study of the hands at a short remove, for me that is nothing more than my occupational habit, cleaning an object with brushes and from the details drawing conclusions about the object as a whole, and, with the whole object in view, checking and rechecking every detail. We're simply an odd mixture, we archeologists: inquisitive potsherd cleaners, layer and fold interpreters. Imaginative and fussy, Latinists and utopians, as half-educated in history as we are in geology, homebodies, tent sleepers, dust eaters, detectives, and virtuosos of disappointment. We have only leads and details to go on, we have to bring loads of patience to a daily puzzle: nothing but missing pieces, three-dimensional riddles that

no one has yet solved. So, too, I studied these hands dispassionately and professionally and tried to combine what I saw with what I knew and with what seemed likely in the great Roman mosaic, as some call it, or puzzle, as I call it, or, as one could also say, in the wonderfully disorderly pile of historical fragments—frequently described, always there to be rediscovered.

The hands aroused my curiosity, but the unusual place in which this encounter took place—which other observers would probably have found strange or shocking—did not. What business had the supreme head of the Catholics in a Protestant church in the middle of Rome? I didn't ask that question, I detected no sensation in it because this was not his first visit to this space. It was precisely here that I had seen him once before, one year earlier, but then it was with full pontifical pageantry, with closed-off streets, police lines, helicopters, ambulances, limousines, guest lists, ID checks, bag checks, metal detectors, jam-packed pews, excited murmuring, an entrance with retinue and thundering organ, reddish-purple or green robes, I forget

the color, the restrained, canonical smile amid rows of earnest Protestants, shaking hands with children, innumerable cameras, microphones, a gold-lacquered theater chair, pious pronouncements, a papal sermon from the Lutheran pulpit, and tact on all sides.

It was a diplomatic affair, a courtesy visit in memory of his Polish predecessor, who twenty-seven years before had been the first pope to set foot in a Protestant church, this very one, in the Via Sicilia. My wife, Flavia, and I had sat approximately where I was sitting now. A lovely production it was, a gentle spectacle to soothe well-meaning Protestants dreaming of church unity or equality but whom he despised, as we knew from other sources. He'll never give you an indulgence forgiving you for your five-hundred-year-old act of disobedience against his fraud, Flavia said afterward, laughing, he needs you so that he can keep making you responsible for the split in the church, why do these Protestants' eyes light up when they are allowed to shake hands with him, with him, of all people!

So it did not surprise me to encounter this prominent visitor here again. I should have asked myself why he turned up in this place for a second time after a relatively short interval, but I gave the question little thought. The images of his official visit were still so fresh in my mind that I felt no excitement or awkwardness about this seemingly unofficial visit, without papal armor, almost incognito, I thought only, Make good use of the surprise audience, look at his hands, what is it about his hands?

The organ droned in the background. The man who had assumed the role of pontifex did not behave as though he felt he was the center of attention. It seemed to me I was the only one among the thirty or forty present giving him my undivided attention, unobtrusively, from the corner of my eye. He sat almost on the fringe, looked on, and kept silent. No cameras were pointed at him, neither the recording machines that television crews carry on their shoulders or mount on tripods nor the heavy **artillery** of the reporters, not even the little camera phones you otherwise see held aloft on every street corner, in every

church, every museum. Here no one was filming or taking pictures, and that alone lent the scene to which I became an eyewitness on that Sunday before Rose Monday, Shrove Tuesday, and Ash Wednesday something pleasantly old fashion, even surreal.

There are sights that are more exciting than the pope in profile, I felt little inclined to stare at one side of a milky, worried face, I just peered over at the partially shaded hands, hanging, resting, supporting, without the ring that his subordinates and the devout are wont to kiss. Turn on your brain camera, I commanded, and pointed the zoom at the hands. Think of painters, who make sketches before they stretch the canvas, mix the oils, and reach for a brush. Sleeves, cuffs, each finger, every joint of a slightly curved hand, every **nail bed**, the creases, the veins. Think of the tensely **rotating** fingers of Raphael's Julius, of Titian's hand of Paul III, of the letter in the left hand of Innocent by Velázquez. Note carefully what you see, I commanded, even without a pencil.

I had planned the afternoon of a tour guide differently. While Flavia, after a meeting at Lake Como, was taking the two-o'clock bus to Milan then the express train to Rome, I had intended to take one more stroll through the city alone before meeting a group of tourists from Heilbronn, not having to play guide and pseudo all-knowing answer giver, without the eager German listeners and their much-too-tight schedule, which they've started calling a window of time. I just wanted to follow my nose without the great Roman Jupiter Symphony in my ears, the allegro of motors, honking, car alarms, construction machinery, motor scooters, dogs barking, the counterpoint of seagull and telephone cries, the crescendo of aggressive, stinking or methane-tamed buses lumbering over potholes, the andante of jostling on the black pavement along tourist routes, the halting steps and ceaseless dodging on zebra-striped crosswalks, on photogenic stairways, and before fountains, the slow beat between souvenir shops, looking at columns, at tables of cheap goods, the dissonances of waiters in front of restaurants croaking in English to recruit customers and of

black-skinned vendors shouting "Capo!" and selling white socks.

On Sundays, only the little symphony is on offer, andante cantabile, Sundays are more boring, but only on Sundays can I give my thoughts free rein in the city center, discover details, and expand my knowledge, wander aimlessly through the realm of stone, which on the seventh day is not so busy, impassable, noisy, and clogged with traffic as on other days. Facades are not hidden behind trucks, cars are not as slow and close, beggars limit their sphere of action to church steps. Only on Sundays can one sit outside in front of bars and not be immediately pestered by Africans selling Kleenex and fake handbags, Bengalis with fake watches and Chinese toys, Romanians with fake songs. On this Sunday I had only one objective, to get to the place where I was to meet the group from Heilbronn by five, at my favorite relic, the finger of the undoubting Thomas as I call it, in Santa Croce, which is **in poor taste** but amuses my more or less un-Christian friends and acquaintances.

A day for a Roman walk, another walk from north to south through the whole Villa Borghese park, to delight in the most beautiful women in the world without having to see them framed and orderly, confined to a museum hall. I jilted them, left them in the Galleria Borghese and instead selected just a few paintings and sculptures from memory, a series of wonderful creatures: the Daphnes and Danaës, the Sibyls and the great Circe, the various deluxe editions of Venus, the ladies with unicorn and swan, Proserpina and Paolina, then added the dancing Satyr and the horny Apollo—Flavia’s favorite god—placing his left hand so tenderly yet with such possessive determination on Daphne’s hip and stomach, vainly trying to hold onto the beautiful girl as she flees the realm of sensuality and turns into a laurel tree. I had walked past the bright facade of the museum aware of the panorama of divine and earthly love and worldly pleasures that lies behind it, commissioned by wise cardinals or popes, strolled under pines and dying palm trees, down pathways and over meadows and created my own gallery of gorgeous women—Bescianino’s Venus beside Correggio’s Danaë,

Bernini’s Daphne, Fontana’s Minerva, and the sacred one by Titian, images that I could not forget, could not thrust from my mind even now, when I found myself surrounded by austere decor, under a golden Protestant mosaic heaven dating from the First World War period, in the unexpected and unaccustomed presence of a pope.

When I was not two hundred meters past Titian’s “Amor sacro e amor profano,” a woman of perhaps sixty, who must once have been very beautiful, repeatedly tried to control her hysterically yapping dog by yelling “Amore!” and only when I was past her did I see the comedy of it and in that moment began to wonder. Her face, it looked familiar, could that have been the Sandra or Alessandra or Alexia with whom, decades ago, during my first internship in Rome, I had once sat on the steps of Sant’Agostino for half the night talking about God-knows-what and whom I followed when the clock struck two? Had to be a mistake, in the glance we exchanged while the “Amore!” animal was barking at my legs there must have been at least a tiny moment of irritation or awkwardness. Forget it, no

brooding over the past, please, no amore nostalgia, I decided, it was just an older woman who was once young, as I once was.

Woman with dog, an ordinary and familiar scene, a talking logo for the new dog cult, I could give whole lectures about that: “Rome going to the dogs and the expulsion of cats in the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century.” “The ten-fold increase in dogs in the last fifteen years.” “The dog craze as index of Italy’s decline.” That’s how far I could have taken this silliness if talk of decline were not so commonplace in Italy. But the wretched state of the date palms has nothing to do with Italy’s decline, the insatiable red palm weevil immigrated from Spain. What did I care about this beetle, I tried to force my thoughts back to the church in which I was sitting where I had set myself the modest task of concentrating on only one object: the left hand.

But the images of beautiful women that I had called up only moments before continued to run in the background, hard to control and not to be tamed, as though they wanted

to defy the papal presence. And Lord Byron refused to be shoved aside either, whom I had just visited on his pedestal at the southern end of Borghese park with the verses, “Fair Italy, thou art the garden of the world. . . .” The poet, captivated by his own verse, gazes down the Via Veneto, taking possession of the city with his enthusiasm, “O Rome! My country! City of the soul!” A quintessential tourist, a tireless romantic, who, from the filthy Rome of the early nineteenth century, from the dull dictatorship of priests, conjured a Garden of Eden and a paradise for souls. Byron’s poetic pathos missed the mark back then, it corresponds still less to today’s realities, and for that very reason I liked him, with his aloof, almost ridiculous pose, his **narcissistic** intoxication with Rome.

On this afternoon, rereading those verses carved in stone, I envied them again, the Romantics and all who came after them, who were able to rewrite the world into a garden and idyll for themselves and cultivate the beautiful illusion that the foreign soil on which they stood was meant for their personal emotional satisfaction. Tourists, antitourists,

and my enlightened and educated cultural tourists, in every one of them there is a romantic sightseer, a romanticizer of history, an Arcadia seeker. On the Via Veneto they want to think only of the sweet life, breasts, champagne, and sports cars, of the formulas or fiction of the sweet life, which existed at best for only a few years or only in one movie. Every one a would-be Goethe, every one a romantic, every one clings to his clichés and collects what fits them—I understand it well. Who, for example, wants to hear that this famous street was once the boulevard of the Nazi occupiers and today flourishes so artificially thanks to the Casalesi and Russian Mafias, which doesn't keep the rats from paying their respects at the twilight hour. If I can bring myself to say, Look at that hotel over there, it was once the Hotel Flora, where SS murderers lived in luxury and the Roman resistance set off a bomb, though not as successfully as they did in the Via Rasella, and so on, the faces grimace. Nazi terror in the Eternal City, that kind of retrospection spoils the vacation mood, and people prefer to read today's murder mysteries in crime novels or watch them on TV, set in Iceland,

Sweden, or the Eifel rather than behind glorious facades or the inscrutable faces and gestures of waiters on the Via Veneto.

People want to be starry-eyed. Once hard-earned Euros have been put down for a flight and hotel, one wants to bathe the soul in clear light, to **bask** under a sunny blue sky of happiness, to experience for oneself the postcard views of ruins and sunsets behind pine trees, a person wants to taste the warm air and cooling pistachio ice cream and have the guide show you where to find what is supposed to be the best ice cream in Italy, one wants the fairy tale. People want palm trees without the palm weevil. Let's face it, you go to Rome to be told fairy tales, and on the Via Veneto it can be only the fairy tale of the sweet life, the package deal: Swedish breasts, champagne, and Italian sports cars. In the Forum they need an affable Caesar and antiquity as a heroic epic, or, under St. Peter's Basilica they want the ready-made legend of St. Peter's bones. Nowhere else have so many legends and myths been invented, and because they've been repeated

thousands of times, they become miraculously all but indistinguishable from the truth. Nowhere else, I say—though I must admit, I know only Rome and Bremen—do people so eagerly believe the fabrications and so like to be deceived as they do here.

At times I envy them, the foreigners I guide, because they do not know and do not need to know what the police tell the press every now and again after someone is shot down in the street: which neighborhoods are controlled by the Calabrian Mafia and which by the Chinese, which by the Neapolitan, Casalesi, Romanian, or Russian Mafia gangs, they even give the names of the family involved and its sphere of influence and put maps of the city in the newspaper with the names. Mafia-free zones seem no longer to exist in the “city of the soul,” which seems to bother no one in a land ruled by a friend of the Mafia. Sometimes a murder results in reallocation of land and the straightening of transportation routes, the garden of the world is staked out and divided up, “fair Italy” a battleground for business people not exactly known for

fairness in the weapons, drugs, gambling, prostitution, human trafficking, extortion, and blackmail sectors. But here is my dilemma: visitors to Rome do not like to hear references of this nature, only when rumor has it that the Vatican is engaging in money laundering do people prick up their ears, the church and capital, that’s always a big draw.

The most beautiful women, the handsome Byron, the “Amore!” woman, the elegant Veneto, the hidden Mafia, it surprised me how rapidly each new image faded in over the last, how hastily my brain processed a simultaneous show of these recent impressions while I was trying to get used to being in the presence of a pope. It seemed I did not want to be distracted, least of all to leave the awkward, unpleasant chain of Mafia associations, a minefield before which everyone instantly cries out, Careful! Cliché! Italy cliché! As enlightened, prejudice-free Europeans we are supposed to avoid that sort of thing, fighting preconceived notions has become the highest virtue, a virtue higher than fighting the Mafia, which people like us can fight only by

not remaining silent when everyone else does and by calling by their right names whomever and whatever the police call by their right names. The more these gangs spread out over Italy and half of Europe, the more the Mafia shares in the proceeds of every tomato, every orange, the stronger this taboo becomes, the more emphatically everyone tries to dismiss it: Please, don't demonize the Mafia, whisper the friends of the Mafia. Please, no pistols-and-pasta clichés, say the Italians. Please, enough of tired old prejudices, cry the Germans, we're not sauerkraut-eating Huns, and they aren't spaghetti eaters, enough already!

Lately I've paid less attention to these taboos, sometimes at the risk of driving off what few clients I have. Tell your tourists this truth, too, Flavia advised me not long ago, that the Mafia's heart does not beat in Palermo, Naples, or Milan but in London. That's where it's easiest for our Italian clans and others to become fine business people with the dirty money they're allowed to bring in, unaudited and untaxed. That's the one time you can

commend our agents, who run up against their limits with the financially **hypocritical** Britons. A great bit of advice that: London as a paradise for European economic criminals, that really scares my tourists, and I need say nothing more to spoil their Italian mood.

It was with **musings** like these about "fair Italy" that, after leaving Lord Byron, I had walked down Via Veneto, turned off, and in Via Sicilia saw the open doors of the Evangelical church, surprised to find any doors open at all, let alone those of a church, at this time of the afternoon when almost no one is out and about and families that gather for lunch are just having their caffè or calling for the check in restaurants. I had entered, although there was nothing great, nothing particular to marvel at, no highlight, no must-see, no not-to-be-missed, at most, for Danes, there is the baptismal font by Thorwaldsen. I leave this church out of my tours and had not been back to it since that papal visit a year ago. Sit for a few minutes, that's all I wanted to do, after being repelled by the pretentious coffee bars on Via Veneto and the looks of the

uniformed waiters, reminding me of my worthlessness. The open doors and hard pews seemed like just the place to continue reflections on how best to broach ugly truths with my clientele more tactfully, without being a spoilsport, a Rome spoiler.

After taking a seat close to the door and soon thereafter discovering the high visitor and his escorts, only gradually was I able to shake off the images and insights I had collected earlier and begin to savor the minor sensation of unexpectedly sitting so close to the most famous man in the city, he on a splendid but no doubt unpleasantly cold marble pew, I on a wooden pew, likewise in the last row, only six or seven meters away. Who would ever expect a pope to forego the pompous entrance with entourage that is customary on such occasions and quietly take a seat in the background, modestly, without the consecration of flash bulbs? The figure I had seen so often from a distance interested me little, a silent pope was another matter, finally, I was ready for the distraction, for a while I did not need to struggle with Mafia, Nazis, and the perils of

romanticizing Rome, and I remained sitting there longer than I had intended.

It certainly would have been more exciting, our accidental meeting, if we want to call it a meeting, had [it]¹ happened in a less unlikely place. If in a so-called house of God, then in a touristically and art-historically more exciting church, the Santa Maria della Vittoria, for example, not ten minutes from here, with Teresa in the throes of orgasm, or San Clemente, where there would have been much more to tell, which would have lent itself to indulging in vivid fantasies, and, in the process, doing some educating on double meanings and Roman stratification, from the Mithraic cult to the Totti cult, a church from the era when original sin was invented. There I would have shone as tour guide and could have done some self-promotion on the side as well. Competition is stiff in our business.

¹ Word missing in German original text?

There are dozens, hundreds of places more attractive for meeting a pope, more attractive at least as a backdrop for good television images and with vivid colors for shaky, blurry proof of authenticity on YouTube. There was still not a camera to be seen, not even a flashing pocket phone. I was not thinking of future proof, either, I was not thinking even of writing a first-hand account of this Sunday afternoon nor even of needing to write one, because the unheard-of event of the day had not yet happened. If from the beginning I'd had any inkling of what I was about to experience, my observations, instead of being fixed only on the elderly gentleman's hands, would certainly have been quite a bit more broadly focused.

Even that might not have forestalled possible objections by future readers of these lines: If you're doing an exclusive on the pope incognito in words and words alone, some will think, then please, choose Saint Peter or the Lateran or Santa Maria dei Miracoli as the backdrop or revel in baroque! Can't you rewrite your report, get rid of

winter, celebrate spring, have blue sky instead of a closed Protestant interior? And while you're at it: churches are a bit much anyway, couldn't you choose a photogenic corner of the Forum or the Baths of Carcalla for the meeting? Go to the popular Pincian Hill with its vista and evening sun, couldn't you meet the disguised pope on a park bench there?

If I want to stick to the truth, I have to do without excursions of that kind, avoid pretty postcards with red sunsets, pandering to expectations, and offering art prints. I did not choose the setting. Can I help it if something drew the pope to this space for a second time? So I can't move him to Santa Maria della Vittoria. And I have to report as accurately as possible what I saw, heard, felt, and thought before arriving at the climax of the day, the sensation of the year. I would have loved to change the location, exchange the Protestant interior for a Catholic one, but the elderly gentleman with the gentle, tired look remained sitting, almost motionless, on the marble pew. If I want to stick to the truth, I can speak only of this

comparatively homely church, about which there is little to tell, a product of the last years of Wilhelm, with much marble and overstated mosaic splendor but little aura, scarcely any history, no scars.

So my eager eyes concentrated on the hands, the way the archeologist in me learned to do: First note the overall picture, then carefully expose each layer, in this case proceeding from the fingers to the hand, from the fingers to the cuff, to the sleeve, then position, coloration, wrinkles. Draw further conclusions about the find and layering, in this case without ruler, notebook, pencil, or brushes, using only eye measurement and imagination, step by step, beginning with the left hand on the left knee. An archeologist does not excavate, that is a misconception, my professor told us in the first semester, an archeologist frees the eyes.

Writing hands, I thought, of course, those are writing hands. The right is presumably the writing hand, the left is the assisting, paper-holding hand, slender, powerful hands that by what they sign or do not sign can cause many

things to happen with three or four loops of ink under letters, decrees, bulls, encyclicals, and whatever else there may be in the arsenal of papal authority and his sole power of interpretation. No small amount of power to strengthen one soul or another and mitigate suffering around one or another household shrine in Africa or South America. But I didn't want to develop that line of thought, and before allowing myself to be tantalized by imagining everything a signature from this hand can change, I commanded myself, Don't start in on the nonsense about what you would do if you were king, if you were chancellor, if you were pope! It took an effort to resist childish omnipotence games of that sort, but as I sat on that hard pew, the harder I tried to fight the temptation to impersonate the pope in my own mind and usurp the Vatican's sovereignty, the more clearly the image of my Italian sister-in-law in Cologne emerged, who once said, If I were papess.

If I were papess, Monica said, I would advise the archbishop of Cologne and his canons to have some

courage or remorse and return the shrine of the Three Kings to Milan. The archbishop wouldn't even have to be courageous or pretend to be sorry, she said, he could do it out of cold political, Euro-political, Catholic calculation, for marketing reasons, and return the Three Kings, stolen eight hundred years ago, to Milan—which was desecrated and plundered by Frederick Barbarossa—for, say, just the next eight hundred years. What a spectacular act of reconciliation and unification it would be if the church in Cologne would of its own free will offer to return that reliquary, Monica said, it would be not only in the spirit of all Italian and European patriots, it would be a really grand Catholic gesture, and on top of that, Germans would gain in stature, and that could lead to a decisive improvement in the strained relations between Germany and Italy. That is what this stalwart Catholic woman said, this Italian woman living in Cologne.

I tried to imagine the hands signing a decree or initiative like that, thinking all the while of my sister-in-law's smiling face. If you were papess? I asked, is there

anything I can do to help you become papess? Oh, she said, that sort of restitution would still be too modest, too **nice**. In the twenty-first or twenty-second century I hope people will be able to be little more Christian, a little freer and not as fundamentalist as they were before, as they are today. If I were archbishoppess I would say, We don't need the Three Kings any more, they aren't the Three Kings anyway. I would say to my colleague in Milan, We both know the facts, my dear colleague, in the Bible there's not a word about the Three Kings, only Matthew gives us the nice story about the three Magi, nearly a hundred years after the fact. Of course, we believe in these kings anyway, but even we don't know where they went, what became of them, in what corners of the Orient they died. All we know is that our diligent Helen, the eighty-year-old collector of thousands of relics, with her unfailing instinct, identified the bones of the Magi lying neatly side by side in the middle of Palestine somewhere between Jerusalem and Bethlehem three hundred and fifty years later. Earlier, my colleague, I would say, we needed this humbug about those magicians—as well as the myth of the holy deceiver

Helen who, not for nothing has a niche in one of the four main piers of St. Peter's—we needed it for our undisciplined, simple-minded faithful, and we needed her for a city development program, my forebears in Cologne did and so did yours in Milan. We in Cologne, at least, are now strong and pious enough that we no longer need this—I say this to you in confidence—this fraud. Take this shrine, take it for the next eight hundred years, my dear fellow archbishop, do with it what you will. But at the handover, let's have a big celebration of Catholic charity and celebrate turning away from fundamentalism.

And the gold in the coffered ceiling of Santa Maria Maggiore, I asked, would you have that returned too, to the descendants of the slaughtered Incas and Aztecs? No, she said, like every good pope, I would be a local patriot. That's how I recall the words of the Italian woman who lives in Cologne, who since then has come no closer to her dream job, and again I realized how entertaining it would be to play with history and mix it up with what-if fantasies and let myself slide down the slope of such daydreams. I

pulled myself together and tried to put the brakes on my imagination and usher the papesses and archbishopesses out the door of my thoughts.

The organ fell silent, I had scarcely been listening, it had been playing only rather thin strains, nothing from the usual repertoire of Bach, Buxtehude, or Telemann. A man in dark attire—but not a robe—stepped to the microphone and announced that Shrove Sunday was being observed today, translated, “Thou art my rock and my fortress,” the beginning of psalm number something or other, and began reading it slowly. Be my rock and fortress, he intoned, and his words mingled immediately with other pieces of the puzzle and mosaic tiles, with the images of this afternoon flying through my head: the white hands of the elderly gentleman on the marble pew; the paintings of naked women and the rock metaphor of the psalmist; the marble hands of Byron and of the dancing satyr and Apollo's hand on Daphne's stomach; the invisible Mafia on Via Veneto and the visible Sicilian, Calabrian, and Neapolitan Mafias in the two houses of parliament; then the woman

with the little dog in Villa Borghese; the Holy Kings of Milan; the sound of the organ that had just fallen silent; the chirping of birds in the acacias outside. After my initial awkwardness at being in the presence of the man with the face known round the world, I liked more and more just being able to sit, savoring the simultaneity of the show and letting all these colorful mosaic stones whirl through the nerve cells of my memory, mixing, spinning, recombining.

The eyes of the people in the rows ahead of me were directed toward the front, where the psalm was being read, not toward the important man in the last row. His face seemed shaded in the half-light at the back of the sanctuary only because it was not illuminated by the sun or floodlights, as it normally is. The pope did not want to be noticed. It was not clear to me whether or not the others had realized he was there, whether they were pretending to be more indifferent than I or were merely more absorbed in what the organ had just offered or in what they were hearing now. So far, no songs had been sung, no prayers

spoken, no liturgies murmured, but it seemed to bother no one that, on this Sunday, at an unusual, early afternoon hour, the rituals had been altered in some way. The voice of the man reciting the psalm about rocks and fortresses and mightiness did not succeed in getting me to listen more closely.

I kept my focus as an observer of the writing hands, which can move so many things in the world and now were not moving, and at the same time I had in my mind's eye the left hand of Apollo, the seducer, the would-be rapist. The famous sculpture—chiseled, hewn, and polished during the Thirty Years War, when Rome was playing a major role in the rape of Germany—is one of those strange coincidences, one of those quiz questions with no answer: What do Apollo and Daphne have to do with the Thirty Years War? The hands immediately provoked the next question, whether what I had noticed is true, that neither the writing hands of Innocent X, painted by Velázquez, nor those of his successors had signed and recognized the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, and therefore the Roman

church has been in a state of war with the Germans for more than three hundred fifty years.

Then it came to me, it hit me, the memory I had been searching for—finally I knew why, in the very first second of our arms-length encounter, I had asked: The hands, what is it about the hands? Now I realized why I was so fixated on them. I had already applied my power of imagination to them once before, exactly six months ago, when, sitting in front of the television, I had long pondered whether these hands, whether the right papal hand—I always assumed he was a right-hander—was still capable of slapping someone in the face. Or of a spasm that, if not checked, could become a slap or at least a spontaneous, immediately restrained movement. Or did the dignity of the office or the fatigue of age or a growing despondency weigh heavily on the limbs and not only prohibit such a reflex but anesthetize even the thought of one?

Six months ago, when the oil dictator from the other side of the sea came to Rome for the fourth state visit within a

year, to celebrate unbreakable friendship with the reigning friend of dictators and conclude business deals—barely transparent government and private deals—when the oil dictator and Islamist lay preacher **casually** taunted Christianity and the church, which was going too far, even for a respectable heretic, I could not help thinking, as I sat in front of the television, of an impulsive movement of the papal hand. A slap, not for the guest, that would not be good form, but for the host, who showered his pal from the desert with compliments from morning till night in front of microphones and cameras.

How had the man sitting beside me on the marble bench taken the news six months ago, I now wondered again, that the reigning Libyan whoremonger, on the occasion of his state visit to the reigning Italian whoremonger—which is what you have to say if you want to avoid the language of self-censorship and diplomacy and allow yourself to come closer to the truth—had rented ten busloads of young girls and summoned them before his tent on the grounds of his embassy? Pretty and quiet is what they had

to be, it was said, and content with eighty euros for being extras at a lesson on the Koran that the dictator himself gave, inducing three of the young girls, with or without financial aid, to convert to Islam.

Not just this mission and the conversion itself might have upset the pope and his advisors but, I speculated, the new form of religious prostitution as well, the fact that in the capital city of Christianity, at the drop of a hat, several hundred young women could be found who, for the price of a jar of face crème and a tube of lipstick, would stoop to serving as extras for the recruitment blathering of a preaching libertine. In the papal chambers, I imagined, age-old questions must have come up again: How holy is the holy city of Rome now? How sinful has the Babylon on the Tiber become? How threatening the statistic that, in this city, only half of all children are still baptized and almost every second marriage takes place without the blessing of the church? How does one view, from such a lofty vantage point, the fact that today the dumbest geese willingly let their religion, if they have one, be mocked for

a mess of pottage? And, on top of that, a pope may still have the good fortune to be only partially informed about the Roman Babylon in which droves of thirteen-year-old girls are sent by their parents to beauty parlors to have their faces altered to suit the market, in which it is not uncommon for mothers of employment-seeking daughters to offer or force themselves or their daughters upon bosses or heads of personnel departments in order, by means of one or another sex act, with the younger one or the more mature one, to advance employment prospects.

What may have upset him even more than sadness at the mass venality of a once-Catholic people was, I was sure of it, a kind of anger at the fact that an Arabian ruler and Koran preacher flies into the capital city of Christianity and, not far from the Vatican, has the temerity to declare Christendom insignificant and to call upon Europe to convert to Islam. And delivers this message grinningly, *urbi et orbi*, to five hundred hired young women before voracious cameras and microphones. Several church representatives and a few newspapers criticized this

audacity, but not the editors of the newspapers or TV channels controlled by the ruling media mogul. His politicians, down to the minister of simplification, heard these words and, half pained, half shrugging their shoulders, took them without objection so as not to put the oil dictator in a bad mood and endanger profits from road-building projects, weapons sales, and the installation of digital networks in Libya. They dismissed the guest's religious zeal as folklore, while the government's servile television establishment and newspapers celebrated friendship and harmony between the dictator and the friend of dictators.

Back then, in August 2010, a question occurred to me for the first time, and now I was able to revisit it from a better vantage point: Don't the hands of a man like the pope sometimes twitch, does he not feel an urge to defend himself and, if not land a punch on the reigning hypocrite, the host of the uncritically celebrated oil salesman and Islamist lay preacher, then to deal some kind of slap or to dictate or have his subordinates dictate—the bishops or a

press secretary—a small, carefully worded and nuanced verbal slap and for once use the writing hands to defend against the crudest forms of insolence?

Is it possible, I now wondered again, that a venerable man, after such an exemplary rise to the highest rank he can attain, still allows himself to be shaken by controlled anger and feels the natural reflex to clench his fist behind his back or deliver a slap to the face, at least in his thoughts? Does fear of mortal sin forbid even the twitching of his arm? Does fear of the sin of informality stifle every impulse of this kind? Or is the indignation that I imagine—or a jaded memory of indignation—compelled to sink into the cushioned seat of diplomacy and be diluted by backroom deals and dissolved into the vague formulas of communiqués? How long must, how long can someone like him turn the other cheek and keep quiet despite the moratorium to which he gave his personal blessing? Despite the alliance between his Italian bishops and the reigning harem keeper for the benefit and protection of both sides: they won't get in his face about his criminal

activities and private pleasures and he saves the church taxes and gives it schools, teachers, and the laws it needs.

Yes, back then, sitting in front of the television, I felt an odd sympathy, a brief, genuine sympathy for the man who is pope: What does he do when his hand twitches? Are his hands tied? Or do they just feel like they're tied? What means does he have at his disposal against a blasphemer who is useful to the church but thinks only of himself and celebrates himself, who invoked the Holy Ghost when he founded his Mafia-friendly party, claiming he was the Jesus Christ of politics and praising the dictator of Russia as a gift from God?

I didn't know then, I didn't know now, as I watched the old gentleman with the milky-violet face sitting modestly in the background, in genuine or well-played modesty, only slightly more prominent on the marble pew. But I was certain that he and I, a cleric who had never retired and an archeologist who retired early, despite a thousand differences and disagreements, back then in August, perhaps just that one time, had had the same thought: If a

Christian head of state from a European country were to turn up in Tripoli and distribute Bibles to five hundred young men or women and demand that Arabia and Africa become Christian, or if he were to put on a show like that in Mecca—because in this instance Rome can be likened only to Mecca—and exclaim that Arabia should, an't please you, convert to Catholicism, he would be either stoned or else massacred by some other means or, at the very least, driven out with war as the consequence.

He, however, the proselytizing state visitor, was pointedly praised by the foreign minister of his Italian friend and business partner, such witty, folkloric comments about the Islamization of Europe should not be taken seriously, and don't forget, the honorable dictator had praised Italy for being the only European power that had overcome colonialism. That's how the minister described it at the end of this memorable state visit—that's what the relaxed, peaceful hands, obviously so little suited to slapping faces, reminded me of.

Once I was into this train of thought, the images of the horses reappeared, the thirty purebred Berber horses, which the dictator had flown over after himself, as was reported in all the newspapers. Next to the horses stood the horse-faced foreign minister, one of the more intelligent of the television magnate's lackeys who, as the magnate's minister of justice had gotten lawsuits off the magnate's back, as European Union commissioner had deflected criticism from Brussels, and now, spreading his diplomatic mantle on behalf of oil and highway contracts, bank stocks, armaments, and shares in television networks, declared into microphones: Folklore—the magnificent Berber horses, for example—it's all just folklore! And the reigning friend of the church repeated it, bragging about his good relations with the pope, as he always did when he was attacked by one or another newspaper or by democrats, as happened on the occasion of the dictator's visit with its equestrian and missionary highlights, which put me in mind of long-suffering, patient, or twitching papal hands and, for the first and only

time, I felt a measure of compassion for the old man whose hands are tied by the very power they wield.

The horses, purebred Berber horses, as everyone kept saying, I liked the fact that they pranced in among the **aphorisms** at this particular moment as I sat on the hard church pew. They drove out the beautiful women from the Gallery Borghese, the poet lord, the Mafia clans, the dogs of Rome retreated. Now the horses dominated the scene, the flying, athletic show horses that the Libyan dictator brought over on two airplanes to provide entertainment for eight hundred guests and business cronies at the state banquet—which, because of Ramadan, could begin only after sundown—the kind of entertainment one would expect from splendidly caparisoned show horses, trotting and galloping in smaller and larger formations, in synchronized and sequential jumping, all of these feats by costumed riders and expertly trained horses are what one gets to see at equestrian events and the better horse markets.

Thirty Arabian thoroughbreds and thirty aristocratically attired Bedouins are what the man who sneers at Christianity, democracy, and human rights mobilized so that he could bask in the applause of Italian politicians, entrepreneurs, and military chiefs at the Salvo d'Acquisto barracks. The servile government television, which is also the docile Vatican television, presented—perhaps even to the pope, since he is known to watch the news—the two grinning robber captains in the most favorable light, in the center of the screen, flanked by beaming, applauding dignitaries beneath the midnight Roman sky.

I remembered, as a viewer of the broadcast, that I found the episode with the Arabian thoroughbreds no less obscene than the missionary speech, not because of its cost or the dictator's crotchets, not because of the ruling aficionados' adolescent predilection for horses' legs and girls' legs but because of the horses themselves, transported from one continent to another for political purposes. They reminded me of something, these horses sent over the Mediterranean from North Africa, they gave

me no peace, and at the time, in August 2010, it took several minutes, maybe even half an hour, until the synapses of my brain pointed in the right direction: Augustine! Didn't he gain the acceptance of Rome for his theory of original sin with the aid of a bribe of eighty Numidian stud horses brought to Italy by boat?

In this report of the minutes I spent with the pope on Shrove Sunday, I do not want to pose as an expert on church history. I am an archeologist and a one-quarter educated, semi-illegally working part-time tour guide, still awaiting the license promised me by the Comune di Roma. What little knowledge I have is from "casual reading," as it is so deprecatingly called—picked up, gleaned, but read for all of that. Some things I have from Flavia, the historian in the family. I retain all too little of certain details, like this detail about the stud horses, which I discovered twenty years ago in a book on the theology of sin and original sin by a female theologian.

Horses, eighty Numidian studs, the price of the dogma of original sin! This is not the time or place to get into the

childhood of the son of a Bremen government official, but it can be said in general that anyone who has been terrorized for years by the Christian hostility toward the body and by the dictates of the Augustinian doctrine on sin can never forget it, this footnote to church history. I believe it was my sister-in-law, Monica, the Cologne resident, who recommended that book. All the needless torture of Christian humanity for sexuality can be credited to the father of the church, Augustine of North Africa, the bishop of Hippo near Carthage and to one or two boatloads of horses. What an epiphany, what a divine insight, how delectable!

After the oil dictator's horses pranced across the TV screen, I reached for the book about original sin and reread the story of Pelagius. Desiring a humanitarian Christianity, he appealed to the early Augustine, which incurred the wrath of the older Augustine. To put it simply, Ladies and Gentlemen, I would say to my tour groups, instead of building the church on a foundation of poverty and ethics, the later saint wanted to build it on a

foundation of wealth and power, including power over souls. His God wants submission, not that everyone should go to heaven, as the Bible says. Complex issues, those, kicked off by the master of black-and-white thinking, the despiser of women and demonizer of sexual activity, who early on was an ardent lover and had his mistresses, then, as soon as he converted and became bishop, declared women inferior and humans "masses of sin," with this argument: because every individual is conceived in carnal desire, carnal desire is transmitted with the semen, and therefore all humanity is stained with sin in the womb, all partake of the sin of Adam.