

JOHN PAUL EXCLUDED FROM PARADISE

(With Thanks and Apologies to Erasmus)

By

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CAST

John Paul – dressed in Papal robes
Michael – dressed in a white suit
Peter – dressed in a fisherman's outfit
Miriam – the biblical Mary

SETTING

An ornate gate stands closed at the back of center stage. To stage left is a large wooden desk. Behind the desk in a worn office chair sits a man dressed in jeans, work boots and a flannel shirt with his feet up on the desk. There is a very large book on the desk. He is reading a fishing magazine. He is PETER.

From stage right approaches an elderly man in papal robes. He is POPE JOHN PAUL II. With him is a strongly built young man in a white suit. He is John Paul's guardian angel, MICHAEL. Michael strides up to the gate and tugs at it, but it is locked and will not budge.

MICHAEL
(turning to Peter)

The gates are locked.
(Peter does not respond.)

MICHAEL
Excuse me, but I said the gates are locked.

PETER
(without looking up)

Yep.

MICHAEL
Well, open them up! Don't you see who is here?

PETER
(turning to look for a moment
before returning his attention

to his magazine)

Yep.

MICHAEL
(flummoxed by Peter's response)

Well, move it then, man! It is not every day that
such a man arrives up here!

PETER

That's for sure.

John Paul, agitated, steps forward.

JOHN PAUL

This is ridiculous. Certainly those gates ought to be open.

PETER

They are.

John Paul tugs on the firmly closed gates.

JOHN PAUL

No, they are not!

PETER

Yes, they are. Do you know how many souls I've let in since we started this little
back and forth? (Peter looks from the confused face of John Paul to the fuming
stares of Michael) One Hundred and Seven.

JOHN PAUL

Nonsense. No one else has been here.

PETER

Time and space work a bit differently in these parts. Don't they,
Michael?

MICHAEL

That is beside the point. These gates cannot be closed to John Paul the
Great!

PETER
(wincing)

Really? We're going with that, are we? I think I'm going to stick with
Karol. pausing) Wanna hear a joke?

JOHN PAUL

No!

MICHAEL

No!

PETER
(ignoring them)

Three guys die and come up here. The first one steps up to me and gives his name. I look him up in the Big Book, and break out in a huge smile. "Very nice!" I say. "We rarely see such an exemplary life anymore. Come on in! And here's a golden Rolls Royce for you to drive around the streets of Heaven." The second man steps forward and gives his name. I check the book, and nod. "Not bad," I say. "Looks like you had a few issues, but overall, a good job. Here's a silver Ford for you to drive around the streets of Heaven." Finally, the third man steps up, and he looks really nervous. I frown as I look him up in the book, check again, pull out an abacus and do some quick calculations, frown again, make a muted telephone call to You Know Who, and finally say to the man, "Well, it was a close call, but we're going to let you in despite some serious questions. All I have for you as a vehicle, though, is this rusty 1970's Pinto. Good luck." A week later, the driver of the Rolls Royce pulls up next to the Pinto owner at a red light, and the driver of the Pinto is grinning from ear to ear. "Why are you so happy, driving that junk heap around?" the Rolls Royce driver asks. "Because I just passed the Pope a block back, and he was on roller skates!"

A rim shot is heard from offstage.

PETER

I love that joke. (looking at an unamused John Paul and Michael)
What? Too soon?

John Paul strides over to Peter, a determined look on his face.

JOHN PAUL

Open the gates...now.

PETER
(curtly)

You have the keys, don't you? Do it yourself.

JOHN PAUL

Fine.

John Paul pulls a large key ring from his robes. It holds many large keys of various designs. He walks to the gates and tries to insert the largest key in the lock on the gates, but it will not fit. After trying several other keys, all without success, he turns to Michael with a confused look.

PETER

You have a lot of keys there, friend. None of them fit?

JOHN PAUL
(walking to Michael)

This makes no sense. Do something.

PETER

Looks like you're missing one. A big, gold one, maybe?

John Paul rattles through the keys a bit frantically.

JOHN PAUL

It's missing. What happened to it?

MICHAEL
(nervously)

You took it off awhile ago. Remember? It was getting in the way of the others.

PETER

I bet it was.

JOHN PAUL

But it was the key to Heaven!

PETER

True, but you still have quite the collection there. Maybe one of them can be used to jimmy the lock. The big silver one is the key to Earth, right? I had one of those too, you know. I don't recognize the others. May I?

Peter reaches out his hand to John Paul, who rather numbly hands over the key ring. Peter flips from one key to another.

PETER

Let's see... this one is to the Vatican Bank...this one is to the White House. Seriously?

JOHN PAUL

President Reagan gave that to me. Peter gives John Paul a long stare before continuing.

PETER

Here are a bunch of honorary ones to all kinds of cities and countries. You sure got around, didn't you?

JOHN PAUL

(regaining some of his composure)

I had an apostolate to the entire world.

PETER

Indeed. (holding up a rather ornate key) Ah, look at this one. The key to Rome. (smirking) Rome wasn't nearly so kind to me. (turning to John Paul) Looks like you can get into just about anywhere. Except Heaven.

JOHN PAUL

By what right can you exclude me from Heaven?

PETER

(holding up his own key chain, holding just one gold ring)

I kept mine. The thing is, only the holy can enter these gates.

MICHAEL

How dare you suggest this is not a holy man? Look at them down there. They are one step away from declaring him a saint.

Peter looks down for a moment.

PETER

Then let them open the gates for you, if they can. Sorry, but no one gets voted into Heaven. (pause) Do you really think of yourself as a holy man?

JOHN PAUL

I gave my life to the Church.

PETER

That's not what I asked.

JOHN PAUL

I am the Vicar of Christ on Earth!

PETER

Not anymore. That boat has sailed. You're two back by now. Here, you're just one more poor soul.

MICHAEL

Please, friends. Let's be reasonable. Certainly we can find common ground. (turning to Peter) Of course, no one gets voted into Heaven, but the prayers and adulation of millions of faithful Christians must count for something in determining

the holiness of this man?

PETER
(addressing John Paul)

What do you think? Does something become true just because lots of people say it's true?

John Paul defiantly remains silent.

PETER

Oh, certainly you have an opinion on the matter. It's not like the issue hasn't come up for you before now. If tens of thousands, millions of people good, honest, faithful people are convinced that something is true, if their consciences are absolutely clear on the question, does that make it true? (pause) Karol?

JOHN PAUL
(through clenched teeth)

No.

PETER

Well, then I suppose we can dispense with the testimony of the adoring crowds. Now, where were we? Oh, yes do you think you are a holy man?

JOHN PAUL

You're hardly one to talk about holiness. I can tell you one thing. I never betrayed Him!

PETER

I denied Him. Judas betrayed Him.

JOHN PAUL

And you both deserve to be in the same place!

PETER

We are.

JOHN PAUL

What?

Michael steps between the two men.

MICHAEL

None of this is getting us anywhere. (addressing Peter) I've seen you examine thousands of people approaching this gate. Certainly you owe this man, a Pope, the same courtesy?

PETER

An examination? (addressing John Paul) Are you willing to be interrogated on the state of your soul? To have your merits assessed and weighed? By me?

JOHN PAUL

How can I know you'll be fair?

PETER

Do you want me to be fair?

Michael, looking alarmed, tries to intervene but John Paul waves him off.

JOHN PAUL

Of course.

PETER

Then fair I shall be. Absolutely fair. You have my solemn word.

JOHN PAUL

Very well. Proceed.

PETER

Let's start with your travels. I count 725,000 miles covered during 104 foreign trips. You kept pretty busy. How much did all that cost?

JOHN PAUL

I have no idea. It isn't relevant.

PETER

You don't know, do you?

JOHN PAUL

Of course not. Handling such things is not the business of the Pope.

PETER

Which is?

JOHN PAUL

Which is what?

PETER

The business of the Pope. What is it?

JOHN PAUL

You seriously have to ask me that? Leading the Church, protecting the Faith.

PETER

Spreading the Gospel?

JOHN PAUL

This is absurd. I know you are were apparently still are an illiterate fisherman, but do you think this kind of questioning is going to support your outrageous actions against me?

Peter silently stares at John Paul. John Paul glares back.

PETER

I have all the time in the world. Literally. So, spreading the Gospel?

JOHN PAUL
(condescendingly)

Yes. Spreading the Gospel.

PETER

Good.

Peter walks over to his desk and flips open the large book.

PETER

On one of your trips, you had a one day stop in Bangladesh. It cost the local church

\$100,000. Do know where the funds came from for that visit?

JOHN PAUL

Oh, I see where you are going with this...

PETER
(interrupting)

Answer the question, Karol.

JOHN PAUL

Stop calling me that!

PETER

What? Karol? It's your name.

MICHAEL

It is not respectful. And you are doing it to annoy him.

PETER

Really? You think so? It's disrespectful to call a man by his given name?

JOHN PAUL

Fine. Call me whatever you wish, fisherman.

PETER

Thank you, Karol. So I ask you again. Where did the money for the Bangladesh trip come from?

JOHN PAUL

The local church paid for it.

PETER

More accurately, the faithful paid for it. The diocese asked for a donation of sixty six cents per person from the better off areas, and seven cents per person in the poorer parts of the country.

MICHAEL

That's nothing.

PETER

The average income per person in Bangladesh is \$850. Per year.

JOHN PAUL

No one was forced to give anything. Their donations were given freely, and happily, as an expression of their faith.

PETER

If you say so. But how do you justify the spending of public money on your trips? Nearly \$12 million in England and Wales, and \$19 million in Columbia, just as examples.

JOHN PAUL

I am, was a head of state. Those costs were necessary for very real world needs such as security, proper venues, transportation. Now stop this nonsense. It's beneath you.

PETER

Beneath an illiterate fisherman? That's mighty low indeed. But I can't say I give much weight to this "head of state" defense. Do you really think that appealing to your exalted political position will get you through that gate?

JOHN PAUL

You are proving yourself a biased judge, fisherman. I have met many like you, always looking to embarrass the Church and sully her image. I do not apologize for defending the Holy Church from those that would weaken her.

PETER

And you do that best by ruling a city state and living in a palace?

JOHN PAUL

The Church has made great strides since your day. Those institutions you mock make the Church a powerful force. We stand for eternal truth, and the patrimony of the Holy Church resists the shifting currents of popular thought. We are the world's rock! Damn it, man, you of all people should know that!

Peter stands quietly for a moment, looking intently at John Paul.

PETER

Getting back to your foreign trips...

JOHN PAUL
(interrupting)

No one was hurt by my pastoral visits!

PETER

Funny you should mention people getting hurt. Certainly you'll admit that your trips to Latin America often were designed to affect local politics.

JOHN PAUL

My trips were to protect the Church's best interests and extend her influence.

Michael whispers into John Paul's ear.

JOHN PAUL

And spread the Gospel.

PETER

Which are one and the same?

JOHN PAUL

Of course.

PETER

So when you told the people of Nicaragua to obey their bishops and stop supporting the Sandinista government, was that the preaching of the Gospel, the defending the Church's interests, or both?

JOHN PAUL

That is not exactly what I told them.

PETER

But it's what you meant.

JOHN PAUL

That government was socialist, an ally of the Soviet Union.

To adopt that philosophy, even for good intentions, violates the Gospel and threatens the Church.

PETER

But the Nicaraguan government wasn't attacking the Church, was it? It even had a priest as a government minister. Weren't the church members being killed by the anticommunists?

JOHN PAUL

Tragedies occurred, sometimes because members of the Church meddled in matters best left alone.

PETER

Like the four women raped and murdered in El Salvador when they stopped at a militia checkpoint?

MICHAEL

Peter, please, that is enough! How dare you imply that this holy man supported such atrocities!

PETER

(ignoring Michael)

Or the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero by government militia while he was saying Mass? Shot through the heart as he elevated the Host!

MICHAEL

Stop! You have no right...

PETER

I have every right! He claims to be my successor but he could stand by and do nothing in the face of murders, rapes, "disappearing" of thousands, tens of thousands!

JOHN PAUL

I did not stand by! I told Romero more than once to stop agitating, but he refused.

MICHAEL

He did more than that. He prayed at Romero's tomb.

PETER

It's easy to honor troublemakers once they're dead.
Trust me, I know.

MICHAEL

He spoke up boldly against the dictatorship in Chile under Pinochet, and he was not a communist.
He was an anticommunist.

PETER

Pinochet was a thug, and he wasn't murdering his own people to defeat communists, just to hold onto power. He was easy to oppose, because it cost you nothing.

JOHN PAUL

The death of every innocent from the scourge of war and revolution wounded me deeply. I mourned for them. I honored them!

PETER

Then why isn't Oscar Romero a saint? He's not even beatified.

JOHN PAUL

I began the process.

PETER

Ten years after he died, and then nothing!

JOHN PAUL

These things take time.

PETER

He was shot through the heart while celebrating Mass! What is there to investigate?

JOHN PAUL

It matters whether he was killed for his politics or his faith.

Peter paces around John Paul and Michael, seething with anger. He walks deliberately over to his desk and sits down, taking up his fishing magazine again.

MICHAEL

Peter? We need to finish this.

PETER

We will. Just give me some time. Maybe a thousand years or so.

JOHN PAUL

I demand we continue!

Peter gives John Paul a long look.

PETER

When the martyrs of ancient Rome were killed for refusing to worship the Emperor, were they murdered for their politics or faith?

JOHN PAUL

Their faith, of course.

PETER

(making a loud noise like a buzzer)

Wrong. Try again.

JOHN PAUL

I am not wrong.

PETER

The Romans didn't give a damn what or who you worshipped. All they asked was that everyone participate in the civic rites honoring the Emperor. Unfortunately, that meant accepting him as a god.

JOHN PAUL

Which makes it a matter of faith.

PETER

Not entirely. The crime was against the social order, not the gods. The Romans were concerned only about upholding the law, and maintaining power.

JOHN PAUL

You sound like you agree with them.

PETER

Don't mistake understanding with agreement. But back to my question...

MICHAEL

(interjecting)

His Holiness is correct. It was their faith that made it impossible for them to accept unjust laws.

JOHN PAUL

Be quiet, fool! Do you not see what he is trying to do?

PETER

What am I trying to do?

JOHN PAUL

Trap me into agreeing that disobeying the law is permissible if it conflicts with your faith.

PETER

Isn't that true?

JOHN PAUL

Only sometimes.

PETER

When?

JOHN PAUL

When the law is unjust, or against God's will.

PETER

But certainly the regimes in Latin America were unjust. Why was it wrong for their people to resist but perfectly acceptable for the people of Poland to do so?

JOHN PAUL

Ah, I knew this was coming. You are predictable, fisherman. I make no excuses for helping to free my people in Poland.

PETER

Did I ask you to? I only asked why the behavior you found acceptable in Poland was so objectionable in El Salvador.

JOHN PAUL

Because the Polish people struggled against an oppressive, atheistic regime that sought to destroy the Church. The communist system was irredeemably totalitarian.

PETER

And weren't the juntas that ruled so many Latin American countries just as totalitarian?

JOHN PAUL

No. They were authoritarian. There is a difference.

PETER

Which is?

JOHN PAUL

They did not seek to destroy the Church. The ability of the Church to thrive is paramount.

