

## A Conversation with **Luis M. Rocha**

### **How do you describe this book?**

I think of it as a new perspective on what happened to John Paul II—specifically the 1981 assassination attempt that nearly took his life. Over the years the attack on the Pope has been seen as the work of either a crazed lone gunman—Mehmet Ali Ağca—or as a conspiracy involving any number of outside forces including, among others, the Turks, the Russians, the Iranians, or the Bulgarians and their secret intelligence services. In reality the people who wanted to kill John Paul II were the same ones who were responsible for the murder of his predecessor, John Paul I. No other book has focused on the attempted assassination in this way.

### **Why did you choose THE HOLY BULLET as the title of your new thriller?**

Ali Ağca shot the Pope six times from a distance of just five feet away and yet only three of his bullets actually hit their target. One bullet hit him in the thumb and hand; the other two hit him in the abdomen. According to the medical literature from the case, the zigzagging trajectory of one of those two resulted in the bullet missing every major organ—lungs, heart, liver and so on. The bullet injured John Paul II for sure, and it was serious, but it was almost as if something had diverted its path to prevent it from being fatal. I think of it as a holy bullet because it didn't let John Paul II die. That's where the idea for the title came from.

### **What exactly is the story you're telling about the 1981 attempt on John Paul II's life?**

Before I answer that we need to recall what happened to the Pope's predecessor, John Paul I. He was assassinated because he was too honest. More interested in helping people than in maintaining the status quo, he wanted to give the Catholic Church's fortune to the faithful and used to say he wanted to be the last rich pope. He also started cleaning house at the Vatican. For example, he was going to get rid of the director of the Vatican Bank, American archbishop Paul Marcinkus, who was directly involved in money laundering and countless financial scandals. The Pope felt the archbishop should pay for his crimes and wanted him arrested by Italian authorities.

When John Paul I died, the people who killed him thought it was "case closed" with regard to cleaning house at the Vatican. When Karol Wojtyla was subsequently elected Pope they thought it unlikely he'd act in the same way. They assumed when he took the name John Paul II he was simply paying homage to his predecessor. In fact Wojtyla meant it as an indication that he planned to follow the same course as the man who came before him. From 1978, the year of his election, until 1981 he, too, was trying to clean out the

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Church. He was perhaps doing so a bit less directly than John Paul I but he was doing it nonetheless. Once again Marcinkus felt he had no choice but to take active measures. It was he, along with Licio Gelli—one of the world's great mobsters, and grand master of Propaganda Due (P2), a Masonic lodge involved in all kinds of

skullduggery including a number of schemes tied to the Vatican bank—who hired Ali Ağca and tried to have John Paul II killed.

**Is this speculation on your part?**

No. It comes from the same person who served as the source for my first book, *The Last Pope*. This was an acquaintance of mine—purportedly an assistant at the Italian foreign ministry—who told me in 2005 that he had murdered John Paul I, and then showed me the documents to prove it, including papers the Pope had with him the night of his death which disappeared that night. This is not speculation. The only liberties I took were in the fictional part of the story—the part that involved Raphael and Sarah Monteiro. In the historical chapters I took no liberties at all. It’s perhaps a bit arrogant to say, “this is the truth,” but I will say this is what I believe happened.

**When exactly did you meet this assassin, and under what circumstances?**

I met him thirteen years ago in London quite by chance. I was waiting for my girlfriend at the time and he happened to be in the same place also waiting for someone. We started chatting. It was a very routine encounter, nothing out of the ordinary. We ended up staying in contact and later started talking over the Internet. The month that John Paul II died, he came to visit me in Oporto, Portugal and that’s when he told me who he was and what he had done. Needless to say I was shocked. We talked for several hours, almost until morning, after which I mused aloud that his tale would make a great story.

**Is he still alive?**

No. By 2005 he was already an old timer, like a grandpa—the image of a fragile old man—but he had been very involved in these and other cases related to the Vatican and Italy. He not only gave me an oral description of what he had experienced and what he knew, but also documents, transcripts and a lot of back-up material that I used to research my stories. Without him there would be no books.

**Can you give us a bit more detail on the documents? And are there any plans to make them available to the press and the public?**

They include the papers John Paul I had with him on the night of his death, his diary, and several other documents that helped me create this work. All of them will be made available at 1:00 AM on September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The date and time was chosen by the assassin’s heirs who currently possess the documents in question. It will mark the exact hour John Paul I was killed forty years earlier.

**Where exactly do the fiction end and the facts begin in THE HOLY BULLET?**

The fiction is mainly all the action that takes place in the present day. Those chapters have no titles; they’re simply numbered. The factual material is in the chapters set in 1978, 1981, 1986 and so on. Those chapters are the ones with titles. My goal was to differentiate between the fictional thriller part of the story and the factual part, which serves as the framework for the fiction. Those factual chapters remain true to what I’ve heard, what I’ve read, and what I know.

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**The mystic Sor Lucia of Fatima appears in THE HOLY BULLET as well as *The Last Pope*. Do you think the so-called Secrets of Fatima were truly her own, or were they dictated to her—as in the novel—for more sinister reasons?**

Some of them were true, some of them weren't. The fact that the first and second secrets were revealed in 1941 is great evidence of that. Sor Lucia spent her life imprisoned by the Church. She could not speak freely. People had to ask for authorization from the Bishop of Leiria/Fatima or the Pope in order to speak with her for even a few moments. I know for a fact that she saw The Virgin more times than the Church claims. Not only six times between May and October 1917, but several times throughout her entire life. Everything she wrote or said was recorded but all her testimonials are in the Church's hands.

**The current Pope, Benedict XVI, also makes an appearance in THE HOLY BULLET. Does he represent a new age for the Church? What were your thoughts when he was elected?**

I think he's a clever man. But he's a victim of John Paul II's longevity and empathy with the faithful. Too many people hate Benedict because he seems so ruthless in comparison with his predecessor. However I think Benedict will be admired long after his death. Having said that, nothing will change the Church. No Pope has the power to change it. John Paul I was trying and look what happened to him. Every movement of the Church is very well calculated.

**What sort of reaction did your first book receive?**

It was incredibly positive. People all over the world reacted to the story. They didn't separate fiction from fact—they read it as a thriller and that's mainly what I wanted. My Italian readers, who are very well versed on matters related to the Pope and the Vatican, had a particularly strong reaction. They tended to accept everything as fact and would send me questions as if they were doing their own research. They felt the book gave them answers to questions they had been wondering about for many years. At one point I gave a press conference in Italy and forty or fifty reporters—mainly investigative journalists—showed up. They all treated me like the “go-to-guy” on this matter.

**The Last Pope was published in Europe first and then here in the U.S. Has the same thing happened with THE HOLY BULLET? If so, what sort of reaction has there been in Europe to this new book?**

The reaction, once again, has been very positive. The Vatican still remains silent, but readers enjoyed it and are waiting for the third book. The next one will be released in the U.S. first.

**How deeply involved was P2 in the plot to kill John Paul II?**

Although they had already started to lose influence by that time, they were still connected to Marcinkus—the one who devised the plot—and served as a liaison to the shooter. They were the ones who arranged for Mehmet Ali Ağca to take on the job.

**Archbishop Marcinkus was eventually removed as head of the Vatican Bank in the late 1980s. Why didn't John Paul II get rid of him earlier?**

He didn't know at first of Marcinkus's role in what had happened. In the year that succeeded the assassination attempt, Marcinkus invented a Russian secret agent who claimed that if John Paul II continued taking steps to clean up the Vatican bank and the Church he would suffer the consequences—and this time “they” wouldn't

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fail. So for a number of years John Paul II lived in fear. But it was pure fiction. When the Pope found out the truth, in 1988 more or less, he took measures to get rid of Marcinkus. Instead of sending him to jail he gave him another punishment. He sent him back to the United States. By that time Marcinkus had been living in

Rome for more than two thirds of his life and had cut off practically all ties with his own country. He had become one of the most powerful men in the Vatican. He was not a man of God as we are used to seeing a priest; he was a man of money and security, power not prayer. So the biggest punishment you could give him was to send him packing and treat him as a normal parish priest. He ended up spending the next fifteen or sixteen years hearing confessions and giving masses.

**Perhaps one of the most interesting characters in THE HOLY BULLET is Abu Rashid. Who is he and what's his role in the story?**

Abu Rashid is a Muslim who sees visions of the Virgin Mary. I created him to be a bit provocative. The Virgin Mary supposedly only appears to Catholics. As I was writing the book I thought to myself, why is that? If she appears to people, couldn't she appear to a Muslim? I wanted to give a sense of how ridiculous it is to fight over, and kill each other, over religion. That's just our mind tricking us. I think if Holy Mary appears she's capable of appearing to anyone, not just catholic shepherds or little catholic children.

**The story line involving Rashid seems to suggest that throughout history there have been people of other faiths who have been visited by Marian apparitions, who are then made to "disappear" by the Catholic Church. What would be so threatening to the Church if the Virgin Mary did indeed appear to someone who is non-Catholic?**

The Abu Rashid arc in the story is totally fictional but it does raise an important issue, and one that will be the subject of my third book. Throughout history the Church has taken steps to wipe out anyone or anything injurious to the storyline they want told about Christ. In the antiquities marketplace—both in the black market and among legitimate dealers—the Church has people out there trying to acquire and/or destroy anything that surfaces that threatens the vision they've given us of what we're supposed to believe. It's a very real and very dangerous situation.

**What do you think will most surprise readers of this book?**

Although they seemed to enjoy the historical parts of the story, the main thing most readers of the last book particularly enjoyed was the relationship between Sarah and Rafael. I think that's what readers are going to concentrate on in THE HOLY BULLET.

**You paint a very unflattering portrait of the CIA in this story. What sort of reaction do you think that will get from American audiences? And was the CIA at all involved in the plot to kill the Pope as some conspiracy theorists have suggested?**

I think American audiences know how their CIA works and will take it in stride. And no, the CIA was not involved in the assassination attempt. Nor was the Mossad, the KGB, the Bulgarians, nor any other secret agency. They all had operatives in St. Peter's Square that day because they knew something was going to happen, but they didn't know what. An almost comical aspect to all this was that when the operatives of the various agencies saw their "competitors" they all figured their competitors were somehow responsible for the attempted assassination, or were at least involved in it. It's no wonder there have been so many conspiracy theories involving foreign intelligence services.

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**Were you raised a Catholic? If so, there will surely be people who suggest you parted with the Church for some reason and this is your way of hitting back. What's your reaction?**

Yes, I was raised a Catholic. (In Portugal virtually everyone is raised in Catholicism.) I feel no resentment towards the Church. I've always been able to differentiate between faith and religion. The Vatican wants us to believe there's no difference between the historical Christ and the Christ of the faith—that the two are one and the same. But they're not. I believe the historical Christ and the Christ of the faith are two very different people.

**What do you want readers to get out of this book?**

My main objective is the same thing I wanted them to get out of *The Last Pope*. I want to remind readers they need to be skeptical. They need to think for themselves and shouldn't automatically believe everything they're told. We have to start thinking differently about the democracies in which we live. We are taught our president is at the head of the nation. Wrong. We the people need to start thinking of ourselves as the ones on top because we're the ones who vote our political leaders into office. The system we currently have is that we vote and then take a "let's-see-what-happens" attitude. That's an absurdity.

**What would be a better way?**

We should have total control over our votes. What do I mean by that? Let's say we've voted a politician into office. If, twelve months later, we think things aren't going well we should have the right to reclaim that vote. Once the percentage of reclaimed votes gets to, say, eighty percent, we would have to vote again. That's a small thing but it would give voters a tremendous amount of power. It would certainly ensure that politicians would be following the will of the people rather than doing whatever they want as they work to serve their own ends.

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