

# My Dark Horse Run for Anti-Pope

*by* Con Chapman

It was one of the darkest periods of my life: my girlfriend had dumped me, the firm where I worked had broken up in a fight between two factions, neither of which (sniff) wanted me to join them in their new ventures. I was at loose ends, with no one who'd listen to my troubles but my old buddy, Bates.

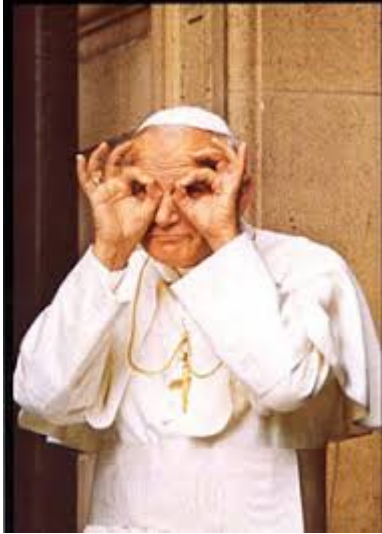


*"I'm running because I believe I can make a difference. To me."*

"So you've got nothing lined-up, job-wise," he said as he tipped back a longneck Narragansett beer.

"I've got a few resumes out," I said. "Nobody's calling me back."

"Hmm," he hummed. "There always the comfy, cozy public sector. Indoor work and no heavy lifting, as we say in Boston."



*"Got my beer goggles on!"*

"I don't know any politicians," I said. "That's kind of essential, isn't it?"

"It's the essence of essential," he replied, staring out the window at a breathtaking view of the Massachusetts Turnpike. "How about saving men's souls?"

"You mean life insurance? No, I've never been a salesman."

"Not that, dingleberry. I meant the Holy Roman Catholic Church."

"Are they hiring?"

"For entry-level jobs—sure, all the time." He paused for effect.

"You take a vow of poverty, and they make sure you keep it."

"So why would I want to apply there?"

He snorted with contempt. "You don't answer the Help Wanted ads, stunod. You aim high."

"How high?"

*"Il Papa,"* he said triumphantly.





*Pope Peyton I, three-time RCC Player of the Year*

It was a daring suggestion, fraught with risk—but it promised great rewards. The Vatican is the world's second-largest private landowner, after Starbucks. They've got diamonds, jewels and great works of art. I'd be *ex officio* Commissioner of CYO basketball leagues *around the world!*

"How, exactly," I began hesitantly, "does one go about . . . running for antipope?" I asked him.

"It's not as hard as you'd think. Antipopes go almost as far back as Popes," Bates said, reaching for a handful of Cool Ranch Doritos, the unique combination of great taste and good fun rolled into one great snack. "The first—as every good Catholic smartaleck *ought* to know—was St. Hippolytus in 217 A.D."



I cringed a bit. I hate it when people throw Catholic lore or liturgy that I don't know back in my face. Like my Jewish friends who caught me leaning the wrong way one night, confusing the Immaculate Conception with virgin birth. Ouch!

"So," I said. "What's involved?"

"You gotta 'go into schism,' like Pope Novatian did in 251 A.D."

"What's that mean?"

He turned and looked at me with a cold glare. I sensed that he was trying to figure out if I had the fire in my belly.

"You don't mess around," he said and there was a strange, hard element—like carbon or titanium—in his tone. "When everybody in the world is saying the guy in St. Peter's is the Pope, you simply say—"

"What?"



*H.L. Mencken*

"Ding dong, you're wrong."

The elegance of his solution struck me as bogus. I'm a Menckonian, and believe as he did that for every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong. "You can't just *announce* that you're Pope and expect people to follow you," I said.

Bates shook his head, as if in wonder at how hopelessly naive I was. "Listen, you dingbat" he said as he got up to play Willie Ruff's Gregorian Chant, Plain Chant and Spirituals. "Might makes right, and votes make Popes."

"What's that mean?"

"The Pope was elected by the College of Cardinals. You go out, get yourself some disgruntled bishops, guys who lost a few parishes in the last round of church closures, and get them to vote for you!"

"Can you really do that?"

"*Can you really do that?*" he repeated in a mincing tone, mocking my diffidence. "Do you think Novatian asked anybody if he could 'do that' before he did it? No! He just went out, rounded up three disaffected bishops from southern Italy and—voila! He's just as much the Pope as your namesake, Cornelius."



*Antipope Novatian, as drawn by my buddy Bates, making fun of Pope Cornelius*

Bates was persuasive but still, there was something that didn't seem quite right about the whole scheme. "If it's that easy," I said after taking a moment to mull his plan over, "why don't *you* become the antipope?"

Usually so confident, almost cocky in his approach to life, Bates flinched like St. Sebastian getting hit in the armpit with an arrow.



"You think I don't want to?" he said, a cloud of regret passing over his usually-*blase* countenance. "If I thought I had a chance, I'd be out on the campaign trail in the batting of a gnat's eyelash."

"Is that shorter or longer than two shakes of a lamb's tail?"

"*Way* shorter," he said. "C'mere."

He led me into his room, to his closet, and reached up on the shelf above the clothes rod. He pulled down a stack of notebooks and sat down on his bed. "Take a look at these," he said.





*Theresa of Avila vs. Catherine of Siena: Cast your vote on-line—now!*

We flipped through the pages, filled with drawings Bates had done of himself in full papal regalia; mitre, crozier, the works. Beneath them he'd practiced signing autographs as "Pope Bates I."

"I . . . had no idea," I said as I patted him on the back to console him. "So why did you give up . . . on your dream?"

"I'm a marked man," he said, his voice catching on the lump in his throat. "I took on the Pope over heretical baptism."

"Ah," I exclaimed, understanding immediately. The question whether former heretics need to be re-baptized in order to be reconciled to the Church has started more bar fights in the neighborhood around St. Peters than who's cuter, St. Theresa of Avila or St. Catherine of Siena. "Funny, isn't it," I said to my old University of Chicago roommate.

"What?"



*Leopold and Loeb*

"That the same dorm that produced thrill killers Leopold and Loeb produced two Pope wanna-be's."

He laughed, more at himself than at my lame attempt at a joke. "You go ahead," he said. "I've got no chance. The Pope and his cordon of nefarious henchmen . . ."

"Like on Rocky and Bullwinkle?"

"Right. They follow me everywhere—I wouldn't live past the first primary."

"They aren't monitoring your brain waves, are they?"

"How did you know?" he screamed in mock paranoia. We both knew that, as powerful as the Vatican might be, they couldn't read our minds from afar. As long as we didn't drink fluoridated water.

"Have you ever run for office?" he said as he put his notebooks back into the closet of his broken dreams.



"Three times."

"And what's your record?"

"Two wins and one loss."

"Pretty good," he said. "What were your wins?"

"Fifth grade class president, and trustee of the 337 Marlborough Street Condominium Trust."

"And the loss?"

"Junior High Student Council President."

"What was the margin of victory?"

"I lost in a landslide," I replied, and not without a trace of bitterness.

"What was the problem?"



"I knew nothing about retail politics," I said. "I hadn't heard Tip O'Neill's famous line."

"All politics is local?"

"No—if you want people's votes you've got to *ask* for them."

"Right," he said. "Well—do you know any renegade priests who could use a little—'walking around money' to vote for you instead of Pope Benedict?"



I thought for a moment. "There's that guy with the clerical collar and the tambourine who patrols lower Washington Street."

"Okay, well—that's a start. Does he control any swing voters?"

"Sure."

"Who?"



"An all-important demographic. The winos on the bench outside South Station."

