

THE SACRED ORDER

And The Mystical Legend Of
Saint Francis Of Assisi



ROGER L. BROOKS

The Sacred Order and the Mystical Legend of Saint Francis of Assisi

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The cover image features a portion of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*, a fresco located in the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City. The artwork, created between 1536 and 1541.

Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY

Artist: Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564)

Description: The Last Judgment. Pre-restoration.

Location: Sistine Chapel/Vatican Palace/Vatican

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For Sabrina...

PRELUDE OF TRUTHS

The Franciscan Order, founded in 1209 by Saint Francis of Assisi after a divine vision, quickly rose to become one of Christianity's most influential—and enigmatic—movements. Its three branches include the First Order (friars), the Second Order (Poor Clares), and the Third Order (lay persons), whose members have included luminaries such as Dante Alighieri, Michelangelo Buonarroti, and Joan of Arc. These figures, while serving God, profoundly shaped human history and transformed our understanding of faith, art, and the pursuit of divine truth.

The virgin birth of Jesus Christ—His miraculous conception through the Holy Spirit while Mary remained a virgin—stands as one of Christianity's most profound and contested mysteries. Treasured as a cornerstone of faith, its true nature has been debated, studied, and safeguarded by theologians for over two millennia.

All depictions of Vatican architecture, Renaissance masterpieces, and historical locations in this novel are authentic and rendered with meticulous accuracy.

CHAPTER 1

Tor Bella Monaca, Rome, Italy
FEBRUARY 9, 2013, 11:44 PM

Ronald Brunelli's arms and legs stretched painfully away from his torso, bound by thick, fibrous ropes that cut into his skin like serrated wire. He had fought desperately only moments before, but now he lay defeated, trussed to a wooden cross that weighed down his battered body.

The sixty-eight-year-old man's breath came in sharp, ragged gasps as he again struggled against his restraints, but his efforts were futile. Pain seared through him, a relentless tide crashing against his will. He tried to form a coherent thought, but the agony clouded his mind, leaving him adrift.

Behind him, a voice broke the oppressive silence, chillingly close. "I'm losing patience. Your time is running out."

The words were followed by a rough yank on his blindfold, forcing Ronald's eyes to adjust to the dim, sterile light of the room and revealing his prison. As his vision focused, he realized where he was—an underground garage, the kind that would have once been filled with cars but now reeked of abandonment. The cold, metallic scent of a mechanic's workshop mingling with decay in the stale air amplified the hopelessness of his situation.

The figure looming over him was an enigma—an assassin dressed in expensive leather shoes, his suit mostly hidden

beneath a pristine white lab coat. His face, sharp and cold, was framed by hair greased back into a tight ponytail, giving him an almost predatory appearance.

“What do you want from me?” Ronald rasped, his words dissolving into the air.

The man leered down at him, the sharp edges of his face twisted into a sneer. He stepped closer, his voice low but unmistakably menacing. “Why are you here, Ronald? Why are you in Rome?” His accent was hard to place, a strange blend that gave nothing away.

Ronald’s heart raced as he strained to make out the details of his captor’s face. The man was tall—strikingly so—with a lean, athletic build. But it was his eyes, cold and sterile, that sent a chill down his spine.

Panic clawed at Ronald’s chest. He needed a lie, something convincing enough to keep him alive. “I’m here for a week, visiting my cousin. She’s terminally ill,” he said, hoping the story would suffice, though it was far from the truth.

Just hours earlier, Ronald had been enjoying the cool evening air during a walk from his hotel to a nearby café, where he’d ordered a simple prosciutto panini and an Italian soda. But on his return, two men had jumped him, blindfolded him, and thrown him into the back of a van. The vehicle had traveled for what felt like miles, heading eastward from the heart of the city. Ronald had counted the minutes in his head, his only frame of reference being a street sign he glimpsed through a tiny opening in the blindfold: Via di Tor Bella Monaca.

His captor’s voice yanked him back to the present. “Your family holds the key to something that doesn’t belong to you. I need answers, Ronald, or you will suffer.”

Ronald’s heart thudded in his chest as he squeezed his eyes shut, desperately trying to block out the growing panic. *Who told him? How does he know?*

When he opened his eyes again, he watched the assassin rummaging through a duffel bag, retrieving something from its depths. The man walked over to the van parked nearby, where a second captor stood watch. Ronald's thoughts scrambled as he desperately searched for any way out.

The assassin returned, towering above him with three iron spikes in one hand and, in the other, a heavy mallet.

Ronald tried a desperate bluff. "The carabinieri are likely on their way," he pleaded, his eyes squinting in the van's headlights.

The man only laughed darkly, then positioned a sharp iron spike at the center of Ronald's palm. In one swift motion, he drove it deep into his flesh with the mallet. The spike ripped through his hand and embedded itself into the wood beneath him as blood splattered across his attacker's coat.

Ronald's scream echoed off the cold walls, tearing from his throat, primal and raw, a sound he hadn't known he was capable of. His body arched against the wooden cross, every muscle rigid with shock as his mind struggled to process the horror.

"Your Franciscan brothers are not as loyal a bunch as you thought," the killer sneered, wiping Ronald's blood from his face with a casual flick of his sleeve. "Is this something you're willing to die for?"

Ronald's breath hitched. *They know.*

The truth that he had spent a lifetime guarding was known only to a select few. His ties to the Franciscan Order were as secret as the promise he had made to take the knowledge to his grave. But now, as searing pain coursed through his body, he knew his options had dwindled: speak or die.

The clanging sound of metal filled the air as the assassin held up the two remaining spikes, his eyes narrowing to slits. "You were warned never to set foot in this country again." His

voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. “Now, where is it? If you don’t reveal the truth, your son will be next.”

At the mention of his son, Ronald’s breath caught sharply. Anthony Brunelli—a renowned artist commissioned by the Vatican to paint a masterpiece for the Holy See—was his one source of hope. The reception for Anthony’s artwork was set for the next morning, and now Ronald’s panic surged. If they knew about Anthony, they knew *everything*.

“Wait! Please!” Ronald pleaded, his voice barely escaping his parched throat. “I will tell you what I know.”

His attacker’s lips curled into a cruel smile.

As the keeper of one of the most dangerous secrets in the modern world, Ronald recited the story he had sworn never to reveal unless his life depended on it, a story passed down from his father. The revelation of the Virgin Mary was a secret too dangerous to speak aloud, placed into the righteous hands of Saint Francis of Assisi. As he spoke, his throat was dry, the words barely forming.

The assassin simply shook his head, his smile broadening. “All of you make the same mistake,” he said. “Tell a tale so outrageous it may just be believable.”

Panic surged through Ronald. “Please, I’ve told you everything. I’ve told you the truth.”

Without hesitation, the man struck another spike deep into Ronald’s left palm, pinning it to the cross.

Ronald’s wail filled the garage as his body convulsed once more, the agony unbearable.

Before the pain could fully register, the man positioned Ronald’s feet one atop the other and hammered the final spike through them, securing him fully to the cross.

Ronald’s voice broke into incoherent cries as the agony overwhelmed him. “Dear Lord God!” he moaned.

Ronald Brunelli had just been crucified.



As his vision began to blur, his life was slipping away, and he knew it. His hearing dulled, the world around him reduced to a muffled hum.

The assassin attached a large eye-hook clip to the base of the cross and began cranking a pulley, raising Ronald—feet first—slowly toward the high ceiling.

When the motion stopped, Ronald dangled upside down. Blood rushed to his head, and his vision darkened as he fought to remain conscious.

“Betrayal, Ronald, is the ultimate sin,” the assassin whispered.

Through the haze, Ronald muttered, “I beg of you... please.”

The killer’s eyes narrowed, his tone deadly calm. “Saint Peter denied Christ. Now you will die as Peter did. My job here is done. *Buonanotte*, Ronald.”

The garage door slammed shut behind him, leaving Ronald alone in the cold, empty stall.

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love...” Ronald’s whispered prayer wavered as his strength ebbed. His mind clouded, the crushing burden of impending death smothering down with unbearable finality.

But as the darkness closed in, a fragment of hope sparked within him. Eight hundred years of secrets, safeguards, and rituals had led to this moment. He knew there was only one person to whom he could turn. Barely conscious, he remembered the smartphone his son had insisted he carry, showing him how to use it just days before. A modern piece of technology Ronald had almost dismissed was now his only chance of salvation. It was tucked into the hidden pocket of his trousers,

an inconspicuous place no one would have thought to search. His heart rate slowed as he clung to consciousness, praying his idea would work.

His body screamed in protest, his nerves frayed, but Ronald forced himself onward. Slowly, painstakingly, he cleared his throat. His crucified flesh sent fresh waves of agony through him, but he pushed past the pain. He had no other choice. *This is my last chance...*

In a final, desperate effort, Ronald wheezed out the universal command, praying the phone would respond to his request even though his voice was barely audible. “Hey, Siri...”

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, to his immense relief, the digital assistant’s familiar tone echoed faintly from the phone. “Uh huh?”

What Ronald attempted next would require every ounce of his remaining strength and nothing less than a miracle.

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