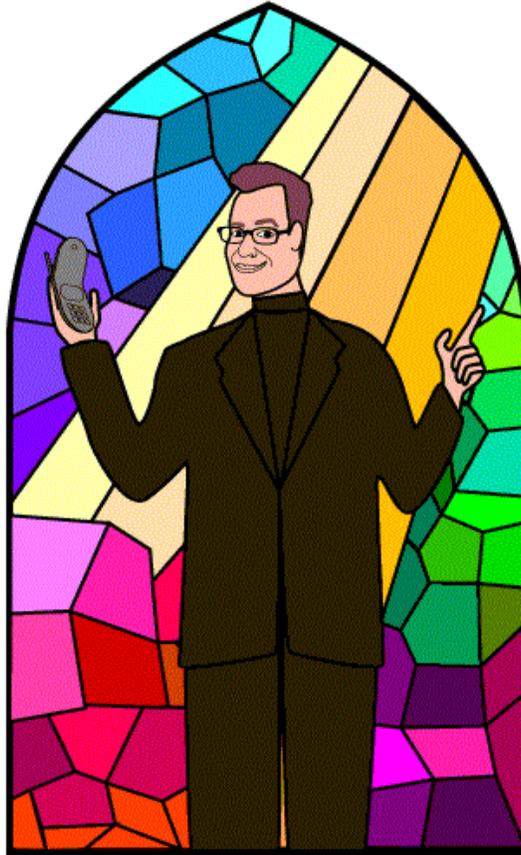


The Gospel According to Marketing



by

Matt McHugh

Monsignor Jim Young's teeth rattled as his hand was pumped in the enthusiastic grasp of a man shod, pantied, shirted, jacketed, and bespectacled in undifferentiated black, made remarkable to Young's eye only by the neckline's absence of a 1-inch white square.

"Hey, how's it going, Father!"

"Please call me Jim."

Finger-gun, thumb-hammer click. "You the son-of-man, Jimbo. And hello and welcome. Cliff Rimmer here, and you must be..."

Young pre-empted. "This is Bernard Cardinal Sharpe of the Archdiocese."

"Mr. Rimmer," said the Cardinal, vibrating disdain.

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“Call me Cliff! And I should call you...?”

“Your Eminence.”

Cliff spread his hands in a pantomime *whoa*. “Outstanding. Make an awesome title for Eminem’s greatest hits!” He prestidigitated a silvery sliver from his jacket and spoke to it. “Note to self regarding working title for Eminem compilation album.” He lingered in the pose long enough to allow the shock wave to spread into a swell of discomfort around the room before pantomiming a bigger *whoa* and blurting “Kidding! Kidding.”

Cardinal Sharpe amplified his disdain vibe and Monsignor Young—who, despite long exposure, was still unaccustomed to the power of the Cardinal’s emotional radioactivity—felt his gut start to flutter like a fish drowning in air. The fish froze when a woman stepped from behind Rimmer’s textile shadow.

“Good afternoon, your eminence. I’m Bella Go.”

Bella Go was a slight, slender, and disturbingly striking figure. Obviously Asian (Young would not have dared to guess “*which*”), with ink-black hair—ruler-straight and T-square cut—framing a face whose unreadability was doubly secured by heavy horned-rim glasses of the variety favored by women flaunting how they could mar their attractiveness with impunity. Her outfit was all shiny black leather and crisp white linen, high-hemmed, low-cut, and form-fitted with business-like precision. She looked like a some kind of Vulcan school girl dominatrix. (That thought did not pop into Young’s head. That thought did not pop into Young’s head.)

“Ms. Go.” said Cardinal Sharpe. His disdain vibe was quite intact but had modulated to a different frequency. Young could not quite name the tune it now hummed.

“Should I kneel and kiss your ring?” asked Bella Go.

“That will not be necessary.”

“A pity. I was curious for the experience.” She held out a stiff hand. “Hello, Father Jim. Good to meet you.”

Young made the sounds “Hello Miz Go Pleased To Meet You” in almost the correct order.

“Ohhh-Kay!” Rimmer gave an attention-getting clap. “Now that you’ve met the Rimmer & Go stenciled on the door, here’s the rest of the Rimmer & Go staff.” He pointed to the suitably motley crew of twenty-somethings at the conference table.

“We’re big on nicknames around here,” continued Rimmer, “So what you need to know is this is Steel, Tank, Lacy, Radar, Preacher, and Brooklyn. You can amuse yourselves as to who’s who and why later. For now, let’s get this party started.”

He sat at the table. Young was forked in a moment of indecision between drawing a chair for the Cardinal or Bella Go. This was resolved when Go seated herself without a glance in his direction while the Cardinal stood expectantly beside the head chair.

“So why don’t you tell me, in your words, why you’ve come to see us.” said Rimmer.

Young felt the prickling of the Cardinal’s radiation ebb his way. “Well, as you probably all know, I serve as the media representative for the archdiocese. If a reporter or newspaper has a question about the Church or Catholic doctrine or what have you, that would come to me to answer. That puts me pretty much on the front line of public relations, if you will. Nowadays, there may be a story here or there in the media that’s a little critical of the Church.” A rustle of snickers came from the nicknames.

Young went on. “Again, as you may be aware, Mr. Rimmer—Cliff—and I happen to know each other from back in college. When I heard he had his own marketing firm, I gave him a call just to discuss the kinds of things your organization might be able to provide for our, um, organization. That’s really the long and short of why we’re here today.”

“So you’re looking to do some kind of image-enhancing campaign for the Church,” said one of the nicknames, whom Young had mentally pegged as Tank.

“Well—”

“Not just that,” interrupted Rimmer. “But a full-blown market research-actioned PR stint cum membership drive cum recruiting effort, and so on. They need the works, wouldn’t you say?”

Nods and grunts all around from Company R&G.

“Well, I’m not so sure what we’d want, but I think we’re interested in hearing what you think about—”

Rimmer again. “Let me tell you how we work here, Jim. We call these initial meetings with a prospective client the ‘discovery process’ and in that process we kick around a lot of ideas about types of campaigns and advertising concepts and the message you want to get across. It’s how we come to know your needs and you come to know our style. Now we’re not going to nail it right away. A lot of what’s said may not be relevant and some ideas may be pretty off-the-wall, but it’s the way we feel each other out, your needs and our style, and zero in on what’s actually right for you.”

“That’s correct, your eminence,” began Go. “We feel it’s essential to start by considering a wide range of possibilities and discard inappropriate ones, rather than begin with preconceived limitations that might cause us to miss options. It’s important to bear with us at first if you want us to work for you.”

The Cardinal snorted. “We certainly have not decided to work with you, Ms. Go, and quite frankly, I’m here only because of Monsignor Young’s persuasion. I must admit I’m inclined to think this is a pointless exercise.”

“And we respect that,” answered Rimmer. “A little healthy negativity is good for the process. But let me say this, we’ve had many clients who initially thought our services unnecessary and ultimately ended up quite pleased with our work. For example, the city police has certainly had some image problems in recent years so they came to us. Here’s some concepts we presented to them that they loved, though for budgetary reasons, never implemented.”

Rimmer *rat-a-tatted* on a silver wafer of a laptop then spun it toward the Cardinal. Face on, it was as large and colorful as an aquarium. A series of images, like wall posters, slide-showed by.

*An African-American uniformed officer staring proudly into the distance, captioned: **BLACK AND BLUE.***

*A ski-masked thug with predatory eyes staring through prison bars, captioned: **THEY GOT ME BEFORE I GOT YOU.***

*A rendering of the Edward Hopper painting ‘Night Hawks’ with a patrol car visible in the streetlight and two cops seated at the counter with coffee mugs and donut stacks, captioned: **24 / 7 / 365.***

*A montage with a samurai drawing a sword blurred into a knight drawing a sword blurred into WWII soldier aiming a bayoneted rifle resolved to a cop aiming a pistol, captioned: **DEFENDERS OF THE FAITH.***

“Etc., etc.,” said Rimmer. He trilled a few more laptop keys. “Here’s some prospective ads for a mayoral candidate who unfortunately had to withdraw before the primaries.” A new slide show in a crisp, patriotic palate:

This November, give your vote to a man who can’t afford to buy it.

What 57% voter turn out will get you (photo of then-current mayor).

(Photo of abortive mayoral candidate looking menacing) School budget cuts? Just try it, pal!

(Photo of abortive mayoral candidate looking menacing) Property tax increase? Just try it, pal!

“And here’s a goody,” Rimmer on the keys again. “A 60-second spot we did on spec for a now-defunct gay and lesbian pride group.” Video filled the aquarium-sized screen:

A paramedic gauzed the bloody wounds of a victim as they bucked and swayed, apparently in the back of a speeding ambulance. The paramedic took the plastic cap of a hypodermic needle between his teeth and bit and spat it out with expert machismo. With a droplet hanging on the end of the needle, he stared dead at the camera and barked, “I’m gay!”

[A dramatic techno-beat kicked on as background, layered with staccato plinks and sythn-horn swells, and a vocal chorus chanted a catchy melody: He's GAY! She's GAY! They're GAY GAY GAY!]

The music played as doctors and judges and teachers and businesspersons and tennis players snapped to the camera to blurt "I'm gay!"

[bump-da-dumpdump. PLINK-PLINK. baaaAAHH. I'm GAY! You're GAY! We're GAY GAY GAY!]

A chef, a cab driver, a priest, a construction worker: "I'm gay!"

[BOOMP pa-PLINK!! BAAA! GAY! GAY! GAY!]

Young noticed probably Preacher, but maybe Brooklyn, air-drumming along with the music and lip-syncing the lyrics. He proudly pointed at himself and mouthed *That's mine!*

[BOOMP pa-PLINK!! BAAA! GAY! GAY! GAY!] *A soldier, a cowboy, a ballerina, a helicopter pilot: "I'm gay!"*

The camera pulled back to a stadium-sized crowd that spelled out G-A-Y college bowl-game style as the boom-plink-baa chorus punched three final triumphant notes: GAY! GAY! GAY!

*Fade to black, small white type: **GET USED TO IT.***

Rimmer palmed the laptop shut with a click. "We had to CGI the crowd shot, but it's totally believable, wouldn't you say?"

"That's not the word that leaps to mind," said the Cardinal.

"And don't worry about the priest in there," Rimmer added. "We just tossed that in to shake it up a bit. If we'd done a final version, we most likely wouldn't have used it."

"Though it tested well," Bella Go volunteered.

"So what do you think?" Rimmer put the question decidedly to Monsignor Young, bringing the focus of the table down on him. Young—to his great credit—hardly squirmed at all.

"Well, it's very professional work. High quality production-wise, to be sure, but it's not quite the kind of thing I think we're looking for."

"Of course not," replied Rimmer. "You want something that's for you, that suits your needs. That's what we're here for. The discovery process."

"I remind you again, your eminence and Father Jim, to please reserve judgment until we've made some progress here," said Go.

"And what might such progress be, Ms. Go?" asked the Cardinal. "The composition of a snappy theme song?"

She shrugged. "Music can have a powerful reinforcing effect for any message."

Sharpe turned to her, his face brightening with a realization. "Why, you're quite right, Ms. Go! Perhaps that's why the Church has used music as part of the liturgy for a millennium or so."

The gasping fish in Monsignor Young's belly began flailing anew.

"That's very true," commented Preacher-maybe-Brooklyn. "They do have some really kicking music. What's that Latin chanting that they do?"

"Gregorian?" said Young, glad for the distraction.

"No, no... the Latin stuff. You know that 'Doh-ohh-ohhAAY-AHH-OHH-ayy-ohh'." The approximation wasn't half bad.

"Yeah," said... oh, let's call him Radar. "I've heard some brothers sample that and lay down a nice smooth hip-hop beat. It's very cool."

“Oh, can you see that in a big cathedral,” said (What do you think, Lacy or Steel? Definitely Lacy.) Lacy. “With the sunlight streaming in through the stained-glass windows in multi-colored shafts making this mosaic of light on a chorus chanting. And as the sound echoes through this cavernous space, the camera tracks back to two guys in hip-hop clothes all the way in the last pew. One turns to the other and says ‘Now *THAT*’s old school!’”

The nicknames all murmured their approval. Rimmer caught Young’s eye and cocked his head toward the crew as if to suggest *Not bad, huh?* With the tiniest motion of her head, Go also looked toward Young and stared unblinking.

“It’s an inspiring image and the contrast with the contemporary is interesting,” he offered, trying to sense a reaction from the Cardinal.

The nicknames rolled on. “And then, the beat kicks in, and you’ve got the chant and the beat and a wire cam swoops through the church showing these people enraptured by it all. Then it swoops right up front to the, the—what you call it...”

“Pulpit?”

“Right. Swoops in real tight and suddenly the priest holds up the Bible and we burn the caption: ‘WORD’.”

“I like it,” said Rimmer.

“It’s interesting,” said Young.

“It’s asinine,” said Sharpe.

“Your eminence, please. Remember there are no bad ideas,” Go admonished. “There are simply those you adopt and those you discard. Everyone, continue.”

But the R&G staff needed no prompting as their creative enthusiasm picked up steam.

“What you’ve described is a music video. We could do a whole series of videos with famous Catholic music. Like U2’s ‘I Will Follow’. Or even ‘Like a Virgin’. You know, showing all these girls who want to be nuns kneeling in front of a statue.”

“Are you kidding? That song has a totally sexual context.”

“So? We can just fade out any sexual lyrics. Like that flag-waving jeans commercial that uses Creedence ‘Fortunate Son’ but cuts it off before the verse that criticizes hollow patriotism. Or the car ads that have the Gary Newman song to say how they make you feel safe and secure, but it trails out at the paranoid ‘I can lock all my doors’ line.”

“Sweet. And the less of a song you use, the cheaper it is. I heard you could get just the ‘my sweet lord’ bit from the George Harrison song for next to nothing.”

“What are you going to do, repeat three notes over and over in a 60 spot? You’ll put people to sleep. You need something quick and up. What’s that B52’s song?”

“Rock Lobster?”

“Love Shack?”

“Private Idaho?”

“Roam?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Roam. You could do it like R-O-M-E, you know? All about Rome, and the Roman Church and all that.” Singing now: “*Rome makes me want to, get down on my knees.*”

Silence.

Silence.

And a few more moments of silence.

“You’re right, that sucks,” declared the original proponent.

"I like that song," Young commented. "It may not work here, but I've always liked it, and interestingly, it always did make me think of Rome R-O-M-E."

Young felt the Cardinal glare at him. *Well, that's just tough*, he thought to himself. *I do like the song and it does make me think of Rome. So sue me.*

"Hit songs are tricky," sympathized Rimmer. "People often know them well enough so that taking bits out of context can make you look stupid. Remember Regan and 'Born in the USA'. Besides, they're very overused nowadays. Particularly all the Boomer and Generation X-er stuff flooding the market."

"Yeah, we need to consider the younger demo. The Generation X-Box types."

"Oh! Oh! You know how sometimes you see Christmas written as X-mas? What if you go with Jesus as the original X-Man! Like the comic-book versions of Bible stories you had as a kid. Except we play up the concept of Jesus as a real superhero. He's got special powers and he fights for right and so on. Target the pre-teens, you know. Get them young."

"Collectible cards are real big now with that demo."

"Yeah. We could do one of those role-playing trading card games with cards that have saints and popes and all that. And there'd be bonus miracle cards that would give you extra powers."

"What if we did an actual video game? Where Jesus walks around and instead of like shooting people, he heals them. We could give away a free download of the first level and get everyone hooked on it, exactly like they did with the original Doom. Except this is, you know, the spiritual, non-violent opposite. What would be the opposite of doom?"

"Quake?"

"Father Jim, what's your vision for all this," asked Go, casting an eye of stillness in the brainstorm.

"My vision?"

"Your idea for the imagery or message of a campaign to promote the Church."

"Yes, Monsignor," Sharpe turned in his chair to face Young directly. "Do tell us your vision."

A veteran of many ambush press conferences, Young's composure was not easily shaken, regardless of his gastro-intestinal turmoil.

"Well, I think that the pace and complexity of the modern world, compounded with—I must admit—a growing sense of disillusionment regarding the clergy, has led people away from the idea that the Church, and especially the priests themselves, are really a part of their community. They live in the same neighborhood, say hello to people on the street, teach their kids in school—all this above and beyond what they do in church every week or at weddings and funerals. Obviously, the sacramental ministry is important, but it's all part of the larger ministry of tending to a community. Their pain and doubt and grief and joy and everyday activities. A good priest shares this with the people he serves. I remember back when I worked in a parish, what I loved most was visiting the families. Say a few prayers with a sick grandma. Sit and watch football and just listen to a father who got laid off from work. Play softball at the school picnic. Talk to kids whose mom had just been diagnosed with cancer."

Monsignor Young stopped, caught off guard by the sudden recollection of emotions he never knew he'd had.

"I'm sorry. I can't express it in any creative way. I just know that so much came out of times like that. For me and for the parishioners. A sense that we're all in this together and we can help each other. That's my vision. That's the message I want to get across to people."

Bella Go's face registered a fleeting moment of interest. Rimmer leaned back in his chair and smiled slightly as if at some private recollection of his own. Young even felt the Cardinal look at him with curiosity. The nicknames just looked blank, like a chimp handed a rubber chicken.

Ah, but soon, they were tugging at its neck and feet.

"So you want something more sentimental. Something to invoke a sense of nostalgia. Sepia tones. Grainy old photos."

“How about old jerky, scratchy film of kids playing baseball. There’s nuns and priests in the stands, cheering them on. Slowly, the image dissolves to the modern era, with sharp color footage. But there’s still kids playing and a priest as a coach, encouraging the awkward kid who just hit the ball to run. Like, come on, Timmy! Come on! Get to first base!”

“Dude, you can’t say that.”

“What?”

“You know, the priest, the kid. Getting to first base, second base. You just want to steer clear of that.”

“Hmm. Yeah, you’re right.”

“Other religions seem to do more family-targeted public service kind of stuff. Like those how to talk to you kids about drugs commercials where you can call and order the video. They’re done by those, what do you call them, Donnie and Marie guys.”

“The Mormons?” replied Young, appalled that he got the reference so easily.

“No. You know, at the end it says brought to you by the church of Jesus and...the somebody... days...”

Young again. “Jesus Christ and the Latter-Day Saints?”

“Yeah. Are they the same?”

“Yes. The Mormons and the Latter-Day Saints and the Donnie and Marie guys are the same.”

“Huh. Wild. Are they same ones who put Bibles in hotel rooms?”

“No. That’s the Gideon Society.”

“What about the ones who knock on your door with the magazines.”

“Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

“Hey, isn’t—“

“Yes. Michael Jackson is a Jehovah’s Witness.”

The nicknames all *ahhed* in appreciation of Young’s religious acumen. In that moment, Young realized he’d earned their respect—but at a terrible, terrible price.

“Who does the WWJD? You know, the What Would Jesus Do?”

“I don’t know,” Young was glad to confess. “I suppose it’s most popular among Evangelicals but it’s not really a denominational thing.”

“You see that shi—shtuff all over the place. Bumper stickers. T-shirts. Pins. Watches. They’ve got killer market penetration. We need a slogan like that.”

“That’s a question. What if we had the answer. While these other Johnny-come-lately Christians are asking what Jesus would do, the Catholics have been around so long they don’t need to ask. They know. So they’re TWJWD. *That’s* What Jesus Would Do!”

“Has to have four letters to match.”

“Okay then, TWJD. That’s What Jesus Did. We’re so sure, we come right out and tell you what he did, instead of wondering about it.”

“We need a visual to go with it. Say, a cross—but instead of INRI at the top, there’s our TWJD.”

“That doesn’t make any sense unless you know what the letters stand for. It’s got to be self-explanatory.”

“I got it! TGIF! Right on top of the cross. It’s like, Jesus died for you on a Friday, and you should thank God that He did.”

“Yeah, with the tagline, ‘Salvation... he NAILED it for you!’”

“Hold on. He didn’t do the nailing himself. The Jewish soldiers did, right?”

“All right, how about, ‘Salvation... it was NAILED for you’.”

“Are you nuts? You can’t use the passive voice in ad copy.”

“I think I’ve heard enough,” announced Cardinal Sharpe pointedly. “Ms. Go, Mr. Rimmer, thank you for your time. Shall we, Monsignor.”

Rimmer seemed to panic a bit. “Whoa whoa. Please, hold on a second, Cardinal Sharpe. What’s the problem?”

Go remained stony calm. “You don’t like any of the ideas you’ve heard, your eminence?”

“Oh, no,” replied Sharpe. “I appreciate skirting around the edges of blasphemy as much as the next man who’s dedicated 48 years of his life to the service of God. In any case, this whole meeting is a farce. The Church is not a commodity to be sold with jingles and advertising gimmickry. The moral authority of the Church does not need to be soft-soaped to the public with comic books and feel-good family videos. And the image of the Church is exactly as it should be: the earthly embodiment of the teachings of Christ. That’s not something that changes with the fashion of the times.”

“Isn’t it?” answered Rimmer lightly, tauntingly. “Are you telling me the Church has never re-evaluated its position on certain issues or crafted doctrine or sold indulgences because the spirit of the times made it beneficial to do so? Didn’t the—”

The Cardinal’s face pulsed anger. “Mr. Rimmer, I do not—!”

“LET ME FINISH!” belted Rimmer. He leaned forward and jabbed the tabletop with an emphatic finger, all trace of the goofy hipster used-car salesman obliterated.

“When the author of the Book of Matthew chose to begin in Hebrew with a genealogy of Jesus, was he not tailoring his message to a target audience? When the epistle writers set down that being a follower of Christ did not require strict adherence to Mosaic law, were they not making a conscious decision to grow their available demographic? Couldn’t you describe the conversion of Constantine as a strategic alliance beneficial to both partners, or the Council of Nicea as an attempt to consolidate splinter groups in a fledgling organization? Didn’t the Council of Trent lay down executive guidelines for consistency in both the form and content of all official communications. Isn’t Vatican II the current strategic plan for continued growth and viability in a changing marketplace?

“Throughout history, the Church has grown and adapted to deal with society at large. It can be asserted without fear of contradiction—the only possible quibble being of terminology—that the Roman Catholic Church is the most successful multi-national corporation the world has ever known. It’s a simple fact, regardless of the spirituality of it’s mission, that the Church must exist and function in the physical world. This means, from time to time, you must change the tone of your message to fit the times. Not the content. Not the essence. Just the form. The style of communication. Towering cathedrals with stained glass were built to awe Medieval peasants. Sculptures and paintings and family chapels were commissioned to appeal to Renaissance nobility. Archbishop Fulton Sheen broadcast ‘The Catholic Hour’ to reach Mr. and Mrs. America out there in Radioland, and web surfers can download the latest papal encyclicals from The-Holy-See-dot-com.”

Rimmer sat back, relaxed again, and seemed to savor the confusion on Cardinal Sharpe’s face. Gradually, Sharpe recomposed his huffiness, but with less confidence than before.

“So you have a little knowledge of history, Mr. Rimmer. That doesn’t mean you understand what the Church needs.”

“No, it doesn’t, your eminence,” replied Rimmer. He slid easily back into his artsy business guy mode. “Who really does but the man upstairs? But I do have a fair bit of experience with communication styles, and some insider understanding of the clerical mindset.” He caught the question on Sharpe’s face. “Monsignor Young didn’t mention that we were in the seminary together? Well, not the seminary per se, but a pre-seminarian undergrad theology program. Was in it for two-and-half years until I had an experience in my junior year that convinced me the priesthood wasn’t for me.”

A nickname stage-whispered to another. “Got laid.” Muffled snickers.

“No,” Rimmer replied without pause, “Got a job where I actually made some money.” He leaned forward again, now almost conspiratorial. “Your eminence, if you didn’t like the ideas you heard bandied about today, that’s fine. It’s just off-the-cuff, unfocused, thinking out loud. I’d be stunned if anything worthwhile came this quickly. But I think I have the kernel of the message the Church can use to seize the imagination of the times.”

“Which is?”

“Fear, your eminence.”

“Fear?”

“That’s right. An age-old tool of the Church. Fear of damnation. Fear of authority. Fear of mortality. We humor ourselves that we’re sophisticated modern people beyond such ancient terrors, but the fact is that they’re still just below our barely civilized surface, as exploitable as ever—maybe more so since we’ve tried so hard to pretend they don’t exist. Besides, fear is the new flavor of the times. All over this country, people are masking their fear of the nuclear suitcase smuggled into our one of cities. The dirty bomb waste on the wind, or smallpox in the water. Fear that our world can be shattered by lunatics who believe fervently in their God while we’ve all but forgotten about ours. Fear that our decadence, self-indulgence, lust, gluttony, sloth, and yada yada yada have displeased a jealous God enough to let Him abandon us.

“You give me the time and resources and with the talent in this room, I can come up with the means to craft that fear into a crook to pull in the wandering sheep.”

Rimmer sat back, utterly calm and confident. Cardinal Sharpe looked around the room, slowly sweeping his gaze over the faces watching him expectantly. At last he came to Monsignor Young. Young sat frozen, the fish in his gut now wheezing in agonized paralysis.

No. He wanted to say. No. That’s not how it should be. I was wrong to bring you here. Stop this now.

But he simply waited for the Cardinal to speak.

After a compressed eternity of ponderous silence, Cardinal Sharpe rose to his feet. He squared his shoulders and tugged his jacket lapels and puffed his chest with all his accustomed authority. At last he held out a hand to Cliff Rimmer.

“Mr. Rimmer. You’ve got a deal.”

Rimmer smiled politely and bowed his head in obsequience.

— END —