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New Scientist

Professor Armstrong of Massachusetts Institute of Technology confirmed that a trial has been successfully completed linking human synaptic tissue to a laser diode computer processor through optical fibre.

Armstrong commented: ‘This will be the medical breakthrough for the twenty-first century, the potential benefits of this discovery are endless.’

A creak of the neck, slowly taking off the Anglican robes, Reverend Jenkins shook out her hair, and settled onto a stool. If you measured success by attendance, another cracking Sunday, ha. Ten people if she was lucky, half the week spent crafting the sermon and that’s all she got. Ten people and one of them was asleep by the end, was this Christianity she was spreading or help for the aged? She caught herself, blasphemy or the truth? God, I know you are listening but what else can I do?

Over the last six months she had increased her door-to-door visits, each day in a different school or hospital, nobody seemed interested in faith, Google had all the answers. At least that raised a smile; she ran a hand through her long, glossy auburn hair, twisting at an end.

Looking up into the mirror, the smile bled away, ‘You have a bloody cheek.’

‘Beverley, it is good to see you again, that was a cracking sermon, beautifully layered, embedded messages for the variation in your congregation. I would have been proud to have written and delivered that level of quality.’ The old man gave a gentle smile.

‘Pope Clement.’ She spat out the words. ‘Are you here to gloat? Looks like I need to start locking my vestry to keep out unwanted visitors.’ Anger subsiding, what was he wearing? A casual blue suit? Where were the rest? No Cardinals in attendance – let alone the guards?

‘I am sorry we lost you.’ The Pope began to gather speed, his voice was clipped, this was clearly something he had tried to rehearse, not him at all. ‘We could not ordain you, right or wrong the time has passed. You always were a gifted speaker...’ His eyes glazed for a moment then cleared. He looked around the small room, peeling magnolia anaglypta covered the walls, a simple wooden cross, picture

of an elderly couple tacked to the wall, he felt at home. ‘I need your help, our Churches are in trouble.’

Reverend Jenkins shook her head, had she fallen asleep during her sermon? No, this had been her mentor and coach whilst in Munich, the man who had betrayed her dreams of becoming a priest in the Catholic Church.

She stretched out, eyes looking afresh at the man in front of her.

Fifteen years they had spent working together, first her attending and then actively serving his parish outside Dachau as a pastoral associate. He had been the priest and then Bishop that had unveiled the vocation to her, a way of life, a calling for her to serve. So many ideas to modernise the Church: a fresh new vision for the twenty-first century; partnerships discussed between key stakeholders; the unspeakable broached on her becoming the first Catholic female priest. That seemed like a lifetime ago now; so much had changed, so much remained the same.

The spike of pain twisted on her face.

The Pope took her hands, she did not resist. ‘I need your help, in you I know I can trust. I am sorry I did not fight harder for you.’

‘But you cast me aside, tell me you did not throw the fight to gain the position of Pope.’ The hope of the young lady that he remembered shone through; ten years of guiding her parishioners had taken their toll, the laughter lines and an engrained frown told their own story.

The Pope bit his lip. He opened his mouth and closed it. ‘My advisors, er...’ He looked away and dropped her hands. Ouch! Pain surged through his cheek. Wow, what a slap! He looked back, hands up to try to block.

Reverend Jenkins’ eyes narrowed. ‘You had that coming to you Tony Alexander, or shall I call you Pope Clement, your Holiness?’ She gave a mock curtsy.

The Pope shook his head, face still stinging, ouch. ‘For what it’s worth I am sorry, not my finest moment. You can convince yourself that the final goal is worth it, and that you will right the wrong at a later date. When I heard you had converted to Anglican...’

A sigh, ‘Shut up Tony. I forgive you. I forgave you years ago. Male pride, that’s why they won’t let in female priests, might lead to the Church gaining credibility. Now what do you want, what happened to you? Run out of white?’ She gestured at the blue suit.

Where to start? He sat down and reached for a bottle of water. ‘Like I said, I need your help. The quick and simple of it is that the Catholic Church and, I would imagine, the Anglican as well, have been lying to themselves over attendance figures for years. The huge crowds at rallies, over half of them paid actors. Oh the Vatican coffers are full, we are resplendent in gold, simply bankrupt of faithful. By my calculations, within ten years, the Catholic Church might as well be a Swiss Bank.’

Beverley looked down, could this be? Why would he lie? Did it make sense? It was true; she hated it but instinctively knew it was true. She caught herself subconsciously peeling away a shred of wallpaper. Redecoration of the vestry was not exactly high up on her list of priorities, a smile and shake of head. Recognition dawned; she had been fooling herself that her congregations were undermined by all of the local visits, people fulfilling their faith in that time. Local vicars around Bristol were reporting similar congregation figures, Bishop Calstock had even joked that if they shipped everyone into the Cathedral, they could give a joint service with seats to spare. Yet the national figures looked positive, on the rise. Why fudge the numbers? It made no sense. ‘Why?’

‘Nobody likes bad news, when the finances are sound and independent of attendance, who is it really hurting?’ The Pope spoke quietly, pain in his eyes, though not from his smarting face.

‘Do you still believe?’ A hushed voice, not wanting to know the answer. Beverley dropped her head, losing eye contact for the first time.

The Pope sat up straight, easing a finger between his neck and shirt collar. ‘Now that’s an easy one, my faith is as sound as ever.’ He stretched out and stood up, beginning to pace around the room, sipping from the bottle of water. ‘We face an opportunity. No point doing the same old thing and convincing ourselves we are converting the masses. Even when we did, how many paid lip service and used it to excuse last week’s wrong doing.’ He caught himself with a wry smile. ‘Sorry, soapbox time. The Catholic Church, and let’s focus on my world for a moment, is a bloated, bureaucratic organisation spilling over with money probably invested in shall we say, less than Christian investments. The question is, what to do now?’ He continued to pace, seemingly on automatic pilot.

‘This is why you lot never wanted women priests, men are good at talking; want a job done, ask a woman.’ She leaned back and put her hands behind her head, eyes alight. ‘What is our core mission?’

The Pope shook his head, who was the coach now? ‘Communicating God’s word.’ Where was she going with this?

Reverend Jenkins slowly nodded her head, ‘Communication, we do what the four tigers did back in the 80s.’ She stood up and slowly walked around the room, collecting coffee mugs. ‘You know this one might have a point,’ she murmured, holding a white beaker covered in a web of coffee stain, “God is not a mug” printed in bold letters.

‘Is this some story about a Chinese zoo? Sorry, you’ve lost me.’ The Pope shuffled nervously, eyes narrowing.

‘Four tigers, damn you are so far removed!’ She blushed, catching the blasphemy. ‘The four tigers – Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea – how do you think they got a technological advance on the rest of the world? Invested all of their money in electronics research. While America was blowing her credit on military toys, Asia played it smart. Of course, they got greedy and killed the golden goose, but that’s the model. Do you always let your advisors do all of your thinking for you?’

It was his turn to blush. ‘What are you saying?’ The Pope lifted the bottle of water and half of it ran down his chin. What was she proposing?

She slowed down, ‘If we believe our core mission is communication, God will always be open to all, maybe we have been trying too hard. Why not invest all of that gold and credit in communication? You read about Castells and the Global Network Society?’ The Pope looked blank. ‘We are not just talking change in the International; the Internet and Facebook are tearing it up. Multinationals are pulling the strings, China owns America, the states are fragmenting.’

‘Are you taking revolution?’ The Pope was struggling to keep up, he had really missed their conversations, what had he been doing over the last nine or so years, how out of touch was he? Had he really sold out her dreams of priesthood to become Pope? That thought would not stay buried.

Reverend Jenkins spoke gently, as to a child, ‘Not revolution – transformation. The elites are losing their power base, who do the states represent anymore, their domestic audience or the International? They are caught in the middle, pleasing no one. Like it or not, Castells was right, the power is in the networks.’ Pupils focused, blue eyes alive, ‘God will always be with us all, we need to safeguard the faithful.’

She caught herself, reminded who she was talking to, the Pope, head of the Catholic Church.

He nodded slowly, fingers drumming to a hidden rhythm on each leg. ‘Go on.’

‘A network society will depend on communication; we can make sure no one controls that for ill or otherwise. Invest everything in communication technologies.’ Reverend Jenkins slowly turned and faced the window.

She gazed out to the cars streaming by, lights on. Daylight was fading, where had that afternoon gone? Just like old times, mad as she was at him, she had missed their discussions.

Upending the bottle of water to find it all gone, he reached for another. It made perfect sense; he picked up the telephone on the side table, punching in numbers, ‘This is Pope Clement, I am at the Church of Ascension, Park Way, Bristol, I need a car. Yes, I know that is an Anglican church, I have been visiting a colleague.’ He paused, ‘An old friend.’ He looked across, pride shone through glistening eyes.

‘Five minutes, excellent, yes I am fine, never better, where have I been? You mean you did not know? Of course you did.’ He put the phone down, looking thoughtful, an uncomfortable silence drifted between the two. ‘Would you like to come with me to Vatican City? I, I could use your help.’ He clarified, ‘I need someone I can trust.’

‘Are we looking at change or transformation?’ She tilted her head to one side. ‘I will always be at the end of a phone, text or e-mail, my place is here.’ The corners of her mouth tightened, ‘You didn’t do such a bad job with me; I just need to work out how to get people, young and old, to attend. If it was easy they would not need me.’ To think she had been despairing, what, two hours ago? No challenge, no fun.

He nodded, knowing better than to argue with that look. ‘Thank you Beverley, the plan is a good one; you have given me the structure to work within. The Catholic Church will become a world leader in communication technologies, let’s see how many companies and universities I can buy before the day is out. Time to invest in our future.’ He walked across the room and looked into the mirror; he had not seen those eyes in years, clarity of purpose.