



- [Home](#)
- [Current Issue](#)
- [Back Issues](#)
- [The Archive](#)
- [Forum](#)
- [Site Guide](#)
- [Feedback](#)
- [Search](#)
- [Subscribe](#)
- [Renew](#)
- [Gift Subscription](#)
- [Subscriber Help](#)

- Browse >>
- [Books & Critics](#)
  - [Fiction](#)
  - [Food](#)
  - [Foreign Affairs](#)
  - [Language](#)
  - [Poetry Pages](#)
  - [Politics & Society](#)
  - [Science & Technology](#)
  - [Travel & Pursuits](#)

[Get TransAtlantic, our free e-mail newsletter](#)



[SUBSCRIBE TO THE ATLANTIC](#)

The Atlantic Monthly | July/August 2001

## Graham Greene's Vatican Dossier

*Documents from the archives of the Holy See reveal the deliberations among papal censors over how to deal with **The Power and the Glory**—and wise counsel from an unexpected source*

by Peter Godman

.....

"I n common with many Catholics," [Graham Greene](#) wrote in a letter to *The Times* of London in June of 1954, "I have little regard for the Index in the rare cases in which it deals with imaginative writing ... So far as imaginative literature is concerned (according to rumor both Tolstoy and Lewis Carroll have been condemned) most Catholic laymen follow their own consciences." Greene was ostensibly responding to a letter in *The Times* that had drawn a comparison between the Roman Index and prosecutions for obscenity in British courts. What readers of the newspaper could not have known was that Greene himself had just been sternly reproached by Church authorities. Greene alluded to this episode in later writings. The records of the deliberations at the Vatican over his novel *The Power and the Glory*, first published in 1940, have recently come to light. They provide a rare glimpse into the exercise of what was once a great power, and one of particular interest in the history of twentieth-century literature—the power of the Church to ban the books it deemed dangerous or offensive.

The Vatican had sought for centuries to wield influence over various kinds of writing; in 1571, at the height of the Counter-Reformation, it established the Congregation of the Index, a department responsible for censoring and even banning books (when it had some power over the author or the publication process), or at the very least for telling Catholics which books they simply shouldn't read. The Congregation of the Index was abolished in 1917, but censorship continued to be exercised by another department, the Holy Office, and an official Index of Forbidden Books was maintained until 1966.

How did the Holy Office operate during a tense and troubled period in recent history such as the Cold War? What was its policy toward Catholic authors? To what extent was it informed about new developments in scholarship and literature? What kinds of internal disagreements did the department experience? Such questions are prompted by the cases of a number of twentieth-century writers, some of whom were converts to the Church of Rome. Greene was one of these. In the introduction to a later edition of *The Power and the Glory* he wrote,

The Archbishop of Westminster read me a letter from the Holy Office condemning my novel because it was "paradoxical" and "dealt with extraordinary circumstances." The price of liberty, even within a Church, is eternal vigilance, but I wonder whether any of the totalitarian states ... would have treated me as gently when I refused to revise the book on the casuistical ground that the copyright was in the hands of my publishers. There was no public condemnation, and the affair was allowed to drop into that peaceful oblivion which the Church wisely reserves for unimportant issues.

In July of 1965 Greene had an audience with Pope Paul VI. He told the Pope that *The Power and the Glory* had been condemned by the Holy Office. According to Greene, the Pope asked, "Who condemned it?" Greene replied, "Cardinal Pizzardo." Paul VI repeated the name with a wry smile and added, "Mr. Greene, some parts of your book are certain to offend some Catholics, but you should pay no attention to that."

These sentences have intrigued me ever since I first read them, some years ago, in Greene's *Ways of Escape*. The records of censorial investigations undertaken after the death of Leo XIII, in 1903, are in the archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and are not available to be consulted by outside scholars. In February of last year I sought and obtained an audience with the Congregation's prefect, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. To my request that an exception be made to the rules, the reply was one word, uttered without hesitation: "Ja."

**T**he *Power and the Glory* is set in the southern-Mexican state of Tabasco, which is governed by a ruthless persecutor of Catholics, Tomas Garrido Canabal. It is based on a journey to Mexico that Greene made in 1938. An atheist and a puritan, Canabal detested organized religion and alcohol. The central figure in Greene's book is a whiskey priest, who is put to death by Canabal's police at the end of the novel. The priest, whose prime quality is self-knowledge, is his own strongest critic. Although he anticipates his execution, and knows that he is walking into a trap, he chooses to perform what he sees as his duty and attempts to give the last sacraments to a fatally wounded criminal. The priest puts the chance of saving another man's soul ahead of his own survival. Is this martyrdom? Or is it retribution for moral lapses? The moral and theological criteria of *The Power and the Glory* are ambiguous—so ambiguous that self-appointed censors have sniffed an odor of heresy in the book.

Denunciation or inquiry was the usual means by which news reached Rome of a book that deserved investigation. In the case of *The Power and the Glory*, the news traveled circuitously. Its point of departure was Einsiedeln, in Switzerland. There, in 1949, the Catholic publisher Benziger was planning to bring out a German translation of the novel. Alarmed by the "polemic" that he claimed Greene's book was raising in France, a Swiss priest asked the Holy Office for its opinion. Pressure slowly mounted over the years from other parts of Europe, and finally, in April of 1953, Rome looked into the matter closely. Greene's case was examined (as were similar cases involving Evelyn Waugh and Bruce Marshall). The Holy Office appointed two consultants to consider *The Power and the Glory*. The first of these wrote in Italian, and he displayed

his bewilderment at differences of culture and outlook. Greene's mentality was "odd and paradoxical, a true product of the disturbed, confused, and audacious character of today's civilization," he wrote. "For me, the book is sad." Sadness and sorrow, rather than anger and indignation, colored his tone. The work's title implies an emphasis on God's power and glory, but as the consultant read the book itself, he found only a barren landscape of despair. "Immoral" or married priests; the ambiguity with which the central figure refers to God and the doctrines of the faith; the conviction or the virtue attributed to Protestants and atheists—all this made it impossible for Greene's first reader in the Holy Office to see why the book was regarded as excellent literature. "Troubling the spirit of calm that should prevail in a Christian," *The Power and the Glory*, in his judgment, ought never to have been written. Since the novel had been written, and published, and widely disseminated, the consultant hoped that its fame was already in decline. A condemnation would do no good, because the author, with his "paradoxical modes of thought," would probably not accept it, and the repercussions of an intellectual condemnation could be dangerous, given the author's fame. Better, the consultant recommended, to have Graham Greene "admonished" by his bishop and "exhorted to write other books in a different tone, attempting to correct the defects of this one."

The opinion of the second consultant, delivered in Latin, supported that of the first. Both readers acknowledged that Greene was not only the leading Catholic novelist in England but also a convert from Protestantism. Despite his many failings, the comfort he offered to enemies of the Church, and his "abnormal propensity toward ... situations in which one kind of sexual immorality or another plays a role," it would not do to put him on the Index, because his book was a best seller. The second censor therefore concurred that Greene should be told that "literature of this kind does harm to the cause of the true religion," and that "in the future he should behave more cautiously when he writes."

The mindset of Rome's censors was not malevolent. It is difficult, however, to resist the conclusion that it was dim. Defensive about their authority (which they desired to assert even as they doubted its efficacy), and incapable of grasping the conceptual problems posed by Greene's writing, they could be checked in their course only by intervention from above. That intervention came on October 1, 1953, in the form of a confidential letter written by a highly placed colleague in the Vatican's Secretariat of State. It was a protest addressed to Giuseppe Cardinal Pizzardo, the secretary of the Holy Office.

Years ago, I had occasion to read [*The Power and the Glory*] which a priest had pointed out to me as a highly significant work of contemporary romantic literature. It is indeed a book of singular literary value.

I see that it is judged a sad book. I have no objection to make to the just observations in the [censure of] this work. But it seems to me that, in such a judgment, there is lacking a sense of the work's substantial merits. They lie, fundamentally, in its high quality of vindication, by revealing a heroic fidelity to his own ministry within the innermost soul of a priest who is in many respects reprehensible; and the reader is led to esteem the priesthood even if exercised by abject representatives ... I venture this

opinion because I incline to think that it would be well to have the book examined by another consultant (Monsignor De Luca?) before passing a negative judgment on it, not least because author and book are known worldwide ...

Tact, sensitivity, insight—this letter reflects a different order of intelligence from that displayed in the censures on which it comments. Its author was the Vatican's pro-Secretary of State for ordinary affairs. His name was Giovanni Battista Montini, and in 1963 he would become Pope Paul VI.

**W**hy did Montini stand up for Greene? An intellectual whom John XXIII is said to have likened to Hamlet, Montini was alive to the problem of moral ambiguity. He was capable of discerning links between apparent contraries where less perceptive others saw none. Montini was not only a reader of refined literary tastes but also a collector of literary manuscripts. Among them figured the handwritten original of a booklet on Saint Dominic by Georges Bernanos, which ends with the sentence "There is only one sadness—not to be a saint." Montini treasured that work, echoes of which he cannot have failed to hear in *The Power and the Glory*. The words "He knew now that ... there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint" come at the very end of the penultimate chapter of Greene's novel.

As Montini recommended, Greene's case was forwarded to Monsignor Giuseppe De Luca for a second opinion. De Luca was a loyal churchman (in 1952 he had drafted the condemnation of André Gide) but also a maverick (he wrote articles for an Italian Communist newspaper). He found the Holy Office stultifying. "In this suffocating atmosphere of unctuous and arrogant imbecility," De Luca wrote to Montini in June of 1953, "perhaps a scream—chaotic but Christian—would do some good." On November 30, 1953, De Luca addressed the following memorandum to the Holy Office.

Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, according to expert opinion, are to be considered the two major living English novelists: being Catholic they do credit to Rome's faith, and they do credit to it in a country that is of Protestant civilization and culture. How can Rome be gruff and cruel? They are the successors of Chesterton and Belloc and, like them, rather than attempting to convert the small fry, strive to influence superior intelligences and the spirit of the age in a manner favorable to Catholicism. Their level, unlike that of a Bruce Marshall, is not that of average I.Q.s or, like the clergy in general, that of uneducated readers or pure professionals. Their level is the higher intelligentsia in the contemporary world which they sway and influence towards Rome ...

This is not a matter of heresy or even a scandal; it has nothing to do with theologians or depraved persons. We are dealing with great writers, who are often naïve and obstinate like children, in states of mind that are, from time to time, not inclined to praise but gloomy, not exultant but insistent, and such states of mind are familiar to everyone. To see them being expressed with such crudeness may occasionally

cause surprise and even consternation, but in the end it is a delight.

To condemn or even to deplore them would be looked askance at in England, and would deal a grievous blow to our prestige: it would demonstrate not only that we are behind the times but also that our judgment is lightweight, undermining significantly the authority of the clergy which is regarded—rightly—as unlettered bondslaves to puerile literature in bad taste. The crew should not be confused with the pilot: today great writers are the real pilots of much of mankind and when the Lord, in His mercy, sends us one, even if he is a nuisance, let's not make a Jonah of him; let's not throw him to the fishes. At the right moment (for they are not bad men), they will yield place to the true pilots—i.e.: to the priests.

In the case of Graham Greene, his harsh and acerbic art touches the hearts of the least receptive and reminds them, however gloomy they be, of the awe-inspiring presence of God and the poisonous bite of sin. He addresses those who are most distant and hostile—those whom we will never reach ...

**T**his priest in touch with contemporary culture inveighed against those in the Holy Office who were not. His arguments, however, came too late. The Holy Office had already written, on November 17, to Cardinal Griffin of Westminster. Griffin was instructed to inform Graham Greene of the Holy Office's "negative judgment," to "exhort him to lend a more constructive tone to his books, from a Catholic point of view," and to advise him not to authorize reprints or translations of *The Power and the Glory* without making "suitable corrections ... in light of the preceding observations."

Griffin immediately issued a pastoral letter deploring "certain trends in contemporary literature." Without mentioning Greene's name, the cardinal continued,

It is sadly true that a number of Catholic writers appear to have fallen into this error. Indeed, novels which purport to be the vehicle for Catholic doctrine frequently contain passages which, by their unrestrained portrayal of immoral conduct, prove a source of temptation to many of their readers. Though it may well be that such literature can be read in safety by the select few, so great is the danger to the virtue of the majority that its general publication is most undesirable.

Such, we may be sure, was also the tenor of Griffin's private remarks to Greene at the audience Griffin granted the novelist a few months later, in April of 1954. Greene commented on that meeting in the above-cited introduction to *The Power and the Glory*. In the archives of the Holy Office is an intriguing letter from Greene to Cardinal Pizzardo, written less than a month after the meeting with Griffin. It is a skillful political document, written in a tone of submission that I believe was feigned (the delicious slyness of Greene's paragraph suggesting that the Vatican take

the matter up with his publishers gives the game away), and taking pains to refer to communism in a way that would be certain to register positively with both Pizzardo and his superior, Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviano.

It is not without hesitation that I presume to address Your Eminence: but, in the present delicate situation, I have grounds, it seems to me, to present you with an account of the facts.

On 9 April, during an audience which His Eminence Cardinal Griffin, Archbishop of Westminster, granted me, he handed me the copy of a letter which Your Eminence had written to him on 16 November. The delay in the communication of this document is due to my absence from London: I was in Indochina, where I was doing my utmost to make world opinion, for which my articles are intended, understand the difficulties faced by the heroic Catholics of Indochina confronted with the Communist menace.

I wish to emphasize that, throughout my life as a Catholic, I have never ceased to feel deep sentiments of personal attachment to the Vicar of Christ, fostered in particular by admiration for the wisdom with which the Holy Father has constantly guided God's Church. I have always been vividly impressed by the high spirituality which characterizes the Government of Pius XII. Your Eminence knows that I had the honor of a private audience during the holy year 1950. I shall retain my impression of it until my last breath. Your Eminence will therefore understand how distraught I am to learn that my book *The Power and the Glory* has been the object of criticism from the Holy Office. The aim of the book was to oppose the power of the sacraments and the indestructibility of the Church on the one hand with, on the other, the merely temporal power of an essentially Communist state.

May I remind Your Eminence that this book was written in 1938-39 before the menace which I myself witnessed in Mexico spread to Western Europe?

I beg Your Eminence, in conclusion, to consider the fact that the book was published 14 years ago and, consequently, the rights have passed from my hands into those of publishers in different countries. In addition, the translations to which Your Eminence's letter refers appeared for the most part several years ago and no new translation is envisaged.

I am sending His Eminence the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster the names of the publishers concerned. They alone have the right to reprint.

I wish to assure Your Eminence of my profound respect for any communication emanating from the Sacred Congregation of the Index ...

Your most humble and devoted servant

## Graham Greene

Three weeks after Greene had written his letter, Cardinal Ottaviano—he who had gleefully proclaimed his readiness to excommunicate any Catholic who voted for the Communists—scrawled on it that Cardinal Griffin had told him that the Holy Office should "understand and excuse" this right-thinking convert. And that is what was done.

What do you think? Discuss this article in [Post & Riposte](#).

---

Copyright © 2001 by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All rights reserved.  
*The Atlantic Monthly*, July/August 2001; Graham Greene's Vatican Dossier;  
Volume 288, No. 1; 84-88.

---

**Subscribe to <sup>THE</sup>Atlantic**  
**Lowest rate—No Risk—Click Here**

[Home](#) | [Current Issue](#) | [Back Issues](#) | [Forum](#) | [Site Guide](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Search](#)