



## **City of Secrets: The Truth Behind the Murders at the Vatican**

*John Follain , Gretchen Achilles (Designed by)*

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On the heels of one of the greatest public scandals to rock the Catholic Church comes an explosive exposé of murder and corruption in the highest reaches of the Vatican, the oldest and most secretive autocracy in the world.

On the night of Monday, May 4, 1998, in Vatican territory, the bodies of the commander of the Swiss Guard, his wife, and a young lance corporal were found in the barracks of the picturesque force historically entrusted with protecting the pope. It was the worst bloodbath to take place in more than a century in the heart of the supreme authority of the world's one billion Roman Catholics. Four hours later, the Vatican announced that the lance corporal, twenty-three-year-old Cédric Tornay, had shot the couple, then committed suicide in "a fit of madness" brought on by frustration with the unit's discipline - a conclusion it reaffirmed after a nine-month internal inquiry.

But as John Follain's hard-hitting exposé shows, the official report was a travesty, a tissue of suppositions, contradictions, and omissions. Based on an exhaustive three-year investigation - the first independent attempt to establish the truth - 'City of Secrets' reveals how the Vatican, the oldest and most secretive autocracy in the world, staged an elaborate plot to obstruct justice and hide the scandals it dares not confess. Echoing the pace and plotting of a highstakes thriller, Follain's true-life tale of intrigue moves from the guards' barracks and the pope's palace in Vatican City to Paris, Berlin, and the Swiss Alps, and features a fascinating cast: an old, suffering John Paul II; his chief bodyguard, formerly accused of spying for the Soviet bloc; a mysterious priest punished by the Vatican; and the powerful Opus Dei sect.

Timely and explosive, 'City of Secrets' is the story of a still-unsolved crime committed on holy territory, and of a systematic attempt to hide the fatal failings of a security force charged with protecting one of the world's most influential leaders.

## City of Secrets: The Truth Behind the Murders at the Vatican Details

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# **From Reader Review City of Secrets: The Truth Behind the Murders at the Vatican for online ebook**

## **Gerald Sinstadt says**

A young man from a broken family background (doting mother, wastrel father, violent stepfather) joins the army, is bullied by a commanding officer who cruelly denies him a warranted medal. The young man then kills the officer and the officer's wife before turning his gun on himself.

In a compassionate society there would have been public outrage and demands for an enquiry. But not in the case of Lance Corporal Cédric Tornay. Because this army was the Swiss Guard, the Pope's private defence force. The scandal occurred in the Vatican. Within hours of the shootings it was announced that they were the result of a "fit of madness." Case closed. Nothing more to be said.

In fact, there was much worth saying and John Follain, a Sunday Times journalist based in Rome, painstakingly peels away the layers of cynical deceit and self-protection which sought to prevent the truth from emerging. The result is an engrossing book that points an accusing finger at senior Vatican figures and, in passing, suggests that the Swiss Guard is little more than a Pope Karno's army. It is investigative journalism at its thoughtful, responsible best.

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## **Jim says**

I read this book a number of years ago. It, among other works, led to my reconsidering my connection to Catholicism. Any human institution is subject to human failings. This is the story of one such failure.

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## **Gerry says**

'City of Secrets: The Truth behind the Murders at the Vatican' is a book which must have one of the most misleading sub-titles ever printed. If there is any truth within the pages, I didn't spot it. Despite John Follain's constant and extensive digging and interviewing of all and sundry who may or may not have been involved, we are left with the Vatican's official verdict on the incident. I kept expecting to be reading something like, 'So, after all, we can see that Cedric Tornay did not shoot the Swiss Guard commander and his wife and then take his own life. What actually happened was ... etc etc ... so therefore the official report was a complete travesty.' But no we kept on going round and round the mulberry bush and at the end of it all we were none the wiser.

Okay, there is a great deal of secrecy surrounding everything that goes on within the Vatican and it was often difficult for the author to drag anything out of the interviewees because ranks were most definitely closed when it came to any investigative action. It meant, therefore, that any likelihood of justice was well and truly obstructed.

Some interesting revelations about life within the Vatican and particularly within the enclaves of the Swiss Guard, an organisation founded by Pope Julius II in 1506, did emerge but added nothing to the truth of the matter. For instance there were curfews strenuously applied and if any of the halberdiers, and indeed any

officers, who did have a little more latitude - but not much, missed that curfew they would be punished by having to remove the rust from breastplates or having to completely clean out the canteen. Okay, but how did the murders take place?

There was talk that the murdered commander, Estermann, was a spy for the Stasi, which was the official state security service of the German Democratic Republic, but once again when the author got close to anyone who might have known, their lips were sealed so no definitive answer comes out on that one either. There were also suspicions that someone from within the Swiss Guard was regularly leaking information to SISMI, the Italian military intelligence agency but again this was not proven. So the investigations and what we were to learn from them were almost meaningless.

There is plenty more dull and boring snippets, proven or otherwise (mostly the latter) but at the end of the day we are left to believe the official verdict that Tornay's acts were committed in 'a fit of madness'. Interestingly no-one who knew Tornay within the Vatican or who lived in and knew him from his native Switzerland believed a word of it. The best thing that can be said on that issue came from David Canter, a professor of investigative psychology and the leading British expert on the science of criminal profiling when he commented (after being tracked down by the author on one of his many perambulations around the world when he was trying to get at the truth), 'Quite frankly, I don't know what the Vatican means by that expression; it's not a scientific phrase. It's wrong to assume that what Tornay did was irrational to him. In any case, I think you'd have a hard time finding any reference in any text on homicide to a fit of madness.'

So there we are, that is the most definitive statement about the murders and suicide within the book, about which I now wonder why I continued to the end. I could so easily have abandoned it and been reading something more entertaining for 'The City of Secrets' is far from that.

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### **Eva says**

Definitely an interesting read. Obviously the Vatican is a very secretive place, but this book might blow your mind a little about the lengths that they will actually go to to protect their way of life. Not the most amazingly written book I've ever read but it definitely fits the bill for an interesting and quick read.

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### **James says**

What really happened on the night three people were shot dead at the Swiss Guards' barracks in the Vatican City? This is what journalist John Follain set out to discover. Finding the answer proved harder than he might have expected.

On the evening of May 4 1998, gunshots rang out in the apartment of Alois Estermann, the newly-appointed commander of the Swiss Guards. Inside, Estermann, his Venezuelan wife and a young guardsman named Cedric Tornay were found dead. Within hours, a statement from the Vatican declared Tornay to be the killer, a judgement later reaffirmed by an internal enquiry. The official verdict was that Tornay killed the Estermanns, then committed suicide out of frustration with his new commander's style of leadership. Portrayed as an impetuous, undisciplined troublemaker, Tornay's character was set out in stark contrast to the loyal, heroic Estermann. And that, according to the Vatican, was that.

Others were not so sure. Tornay's mother believed her son had been murdered; rumours circulated that Tornay and Estermann had a love affair that turned sour; a newspaper report suggested that Estermann had spied on the Vatican for the East German secret police. Follain's book attempts to substantiate these claims and to piece together the events leading up to the murders. His efforts are made all the harder by a wall of silence thrown up by the Vatican and by the Swiss Guards' refusal to cooperate. However, the author is able to secure interviews with Tornay's friends, family and former guardsmen, and his investigation also takes him across Europe to consult journalists, experts in pathology, psychology and security. Gradually, he is able to get a clearer picture of the crime and of Tornay's state of mind.

His conclusions about the murders are far more complex than the "fit of madness" attributed to Tornay by the Vatican. But with only circumstantial evidence, Follain is unable to produce a copper-bottomed account of what really happened on that fateful night. Even so, he does uncover some disquieting truths about the Swiss Guards themselves, especially in their role as protectors of the Pope; his revelations will have made uncomfortable reading for senior figures within the Vatican.

### My thoughts

I've always been intrigued by the internal workings of the Vatican City, and this book added to my stock of knowledge about the world's smallest state, and in particular about its armed forces. What Follain discovers about the men supposedly in the front line of the Pope's security is indeed worrying: the selection procedure is casual, their equipment woefully inadequate and training virtually non-existent. More toytown troops than crack defence force, the Swiss Guards are there as a tourist attraction, and many of the guardsmen see their tour of duty as little more than a stepping stone to a better job back home.

Follain's interview with former Italian police chief Francesco Pisanisi underlines these failings and throws new light on the attempt to kill the Pope in 1981. It becomes clear that it was Pasani who came to the Pontiff's aid when he was shot, while the Swiss guardsman on duty that day - Alois Estermann, as it happens - was too far away to respond. Another small scoop on the part of the author is his interview with Cardinal Schwery. The Swiss cardinal is refreshingly candid about the Swiss Guards and the Vatican's own bureaucracy. More than once I thought his good humour, modesty and honesty would make him an excellent candidate to succeed John Paul II. But perhaps those are the very qualities that are likely to rule him out.

With regard to the book's main theme - the murders - Follain is long on conjecture and short on evidence, hardly surprising in a state that makes North Korea seem like a beacon of open government. Again and again Follain is confronted with silence or gossip, a nod here, a wink there. The experts Follain consults are impressive in their assessment of what happened, but of course none of them has visited the scene of the crime. The author can only speculate about the relationship between Estermann and Tornay, and although it would be surprising if there were no gay or bisexual relationships among the Swiss Guards, none are willing to kiss and tell.

For me, the book's style is reminiscent of "A Thief in the Night" in which investigative journalist John Cornwell looked into the case of John Paul I, the Pope who died suddenly in 1978 after just a month in office. Even with the blessing of senior Vatican sources, Cornwell faced that frustrating mixture of rumour and secrecy which Follain had to contend with a decade later. Follain's conclusion is not dissimilar to that of Cornwell in that both believed death could have been prevented if the powers that be had exercised a little more TLC. His account left me with the feeling that the Vatican has learned nothing from previous experience of sudden death within its walls.

A couple of omissions diminish the book's usefulness: it contains no map of the Vatican to help the reader navigate the many streets, squares and courtyards mentioned in the narrative; there's also no index, a

frustrating oversight in a book brimming with incidents, places and characters. These gripes aside, I'd say anyone with a penchant for true crime stories in unlikely locations will find Follain's book a rewarding read. It may fail to live up to its subtitle, but unless there's an outbreak of glasnost in Rome, it's the closest we're likely to get to the truth behind the murders in the Vatican.

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### **Ed says**

Scandalous triple murder-suicide rocks Vatican. What really happened?

I liked the way this book made me feel as if I were there, walking in the streets and hallways of the tiny Vatican nation. The information on the Swiss Guard was also interesting.

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### **S.H. Villa says**

Well, if the Vatican had any secrets, they still have them, because they ain't in this book. Poor management, yes, bullying in the Guards, and homosexuality, possibly.

Some time ago I did some research on Opus Dei to use in one of my Spanish crime series. I was surprised to see Opus Dei mentioned in connection with a book published in 2003 which I hadn't come across, so I bought it and read it.

I began to suspect about 2/3rds through that Follain wouldn't find out anything which could be described as 'The Startling Truth Behind the Vatican Murders' as stated on the cover. [Interestingly, on later covers the subtitle did not contain the word 'startling'.] Sadly, it proved to be so. I suppose Follain did a fair amount of research, spent time and money, energy and thought, and did his best, so wanted to publish. An article would have been appropriate, a hyped book, no. What the Vatican came out with just after the three deaths was substantially true: two murders and a suicide. It painted the young man as a bit of a psycho and didn't credit the reasons he had for doing what he did – none of which showed the Vatican or the Swiss Guards in a good light – but what else would one expect from the Catholic Church? Or indeed from any large organisation with a vested interest?

However, Follain was right to be suspicious about how cut and dried the whole matter was – according to the Vatican – within hours of the bodies being found. Quick explanations of drastic events are usually fabricated, and definitely worth investigating. To some degree he managed to explain Tornay's desperate measures and in other ways he painted him a darker shade of grey. (If that phrase is allowable these days!)

If you want a good book on Opus Dei, try Robert Hutchison's *Their Kingdom Come*. Excellent. There is good reason to think John Paul II, who features in Follain's book, was complicit in the murder by Opus Dei of his predecessor, John Paul. If you want to be 'startled', I recommend it.

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### **Anita says**

Supposedly the truth behind the murders in the Swiss guard at the Vatican. Not well written and no secrets.

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### **Guadalupe Chulin says**

Very interesting book.

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### **Marianne Meyers says**

Weak. This could have been a page turner but instead is very tepid and all over the place.

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### **Hima Kannan says**

fine

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### **Jeremy says**

A murder/suicide in the Vatican and a rush to judgement. No great discovery but a trip through the Holy city and particularly the Swiss Guard that opens many doors to our understanding of the very very closed community. A good read that unveils a lot - if not exactly the thriller it looks like it is going to be at the start.

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### **Jeff says**

An interesting, well-researched look at the 1998 Vatican homicide/suicide. You feel like you know the answer to your questions in the first third of the book, but the author manages to pique your interest in reading further. As usual, the Vatican cannot be trusted to police or even protect itself.

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### **Robert LoCicero says**

A well-written book which illuminates a strange murder occurring in the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican in May of 1998. On May 4 two Swiss Guards, a lance corporal and his commander, and the commander's wife, were found dead of gunshot wounds. It appeared to be a murder suicide with the lance corporal, Cedric Tornay, of the French-speaking part of Switzerland, having shot the commander, Alois Estermann, of the German-speaking part of Switzerland, and his wife, Meza Romero, then shot himself in the mouth. The affair was quickly hushed up with a verdict determined and announced by the Vatican before the bodies were waked. Of course, the younger corporal was vilified as deranged and ignored by the religious authorities including Pope John Paul II. The author's interest was piqued and he followed all means at his disposal to better understand the physical and psychological forensics of the crime. This was no easy task as the Vatican holds secrets and demands others under its control to do the same.



This was an enjoyable read and one can say the results of Mr. Follain's investigation were as satisfying as would be expected considering topics involved in this mystery included military incompetence, spiritual emptiness, homosexuality, cultural superiority, political intrigue and even Opus Dei. What else could one ask for in a mystery of such strange circumstances? Get on board and go for the ride.

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**Chris says**

Not bad, but it just seems to be related rumors more than anything else.

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