

New version of Judas' story

ROME - Curiosity about the New Testament figure of Judas and a feeling that his reputation as the worst sinner in history "isn't fair, isn't right" led British novelist Jeffrey Archer to attempt a new version of the story.

Archer, presenting "The Gospel According to Judas by Benjamin Iscariot" at a March 20 press conference in Rome, said he is a practicing Anglican who wanted his new book to be backed up by solid biblical scholarship.

So he convinced Father Francis J. Moloney, provincial of the Salesians in Australia and a former president of the Catholic Biblical Association of America, to collaborate.

Father Moloney, who served on the International Theological Commission for 18 years when it was under the presidency of the future Pope Benedict XVI, provided scholarly criticism of the text and wrote the bulk of the theological notes and clarifications found at the end of the book.

The text in the gilded pages of Archer's book is organized into chapters and verses, like a real Gospel, with the words he attributes to Jesus written in red.

Archer's main thesis is that Judas tried to prevent Jesus' arrest and execution by enlisting the help of a scribe to get Jesus out of Jerusalem and back to Galilee where the Romans supposedly would ignore him.

In the end, the scribe betrays Judas, which means Judas unwittingly betrays Jesus.

Both Archer and Father Moloney doubt that Judas committed suicide, a story recounted only in the Gospel of St. Matthew.

The Benjamin Iscariot in Archer's title is Judas' fictitious son, who - years after the death of Jesus - finds his father living in an ascetic community near the Dead Sea. His father reluctantly gives his version of what happened to Jesus and the son writes it down.

Father Moloney told reporters in Rome that none of the things in Archer's account

that differ from the accounts of the New Testament can be certain.

"Most of it may be improbable, but none of it – in my judgment – is impossible," he said.

Whatever really happened between Jesus and Judas, Father Moloney said, he believes Judas was a "tragic" figure, but not one who was forced to betray Jesus in order to fulfill God's plan for the salvation of humanity.

"We are all free to say, 'yes' and 'no,'" Father Moloney said, and that had to have been true for Judas as well.

Father Moloney said he agreed to collaborate with Archer because although he has written 40 books about the Bible they have "made little impact on the increasing skepticism surrounding the Christian church" while "deeply flawed and uninformed works like Dan Brown's 'The Da Vinci Code' and Richard Dawkins' 'The God Delusion' have become best-sellers."

"The message of 'The Gospel of Judas' never betrays the teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels," Father Moloney said.

However, Father Moloney points out in the notes that in his description of Jesus as the biological son of Joseph and Mary Archer's interpretation differs from the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.

Archer told reporters that he first brought the idea for the book to his publisher in 1992, but could not find the right scholar to help him.

The author said he was attracted to the topic because Judas was not the only disciple who failed Jesus.

All of the disciples ran away from Jesus in his hour of greatest need, and Peter denied Jesus three times, Archer said.

"All of them showed their human failings, but every one of them ended up as a saint. And Judas, who showed his failings, ends up as the most vilified person in history. It was the extreme black and white that annoyed me," he said.

Father Moloney said he hoped Archer's book would prompt people to read the New Testament and to understand that the Gospels were not written "to communicate the brute facts of history"; rather they assemble historic facts "to communicate a message about what God has done for humankind in and through Jesus Christ."

He said Archer's book, although fictitious, gives "primacy of place" to the truth found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, while telling "the traditional story through the eyes of Judas."

Father Moloney also told reporters that he knows Pope Benedict "has an interest in the enigma of Judas" and would not be surprised to learn that the pope has read Archer's book.