

FR. GLENN SUDANO, CFR

# We Live in a Castle

*Stories, allegories, and commentaries about  
the most wonderful religion in the world.*



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## About the Book

“Blue collar ecclesiology” or “kitchen table catechesis” is how the author describes his methodology in presenting some fresh ideas about what is considered to many, a very stale subject. The title of Father Glenn’s first book, *We Live in a Castle*, is taken from one of twelve stories which, like spotlights, illumine one subject at different angles.

The subject of the book? The Church.

The author describes his work as “friendly yet provocative” as he challenges the reader to dig into history and discover a valuable treasure; which he calls “the most wonderful religion in the world.” Father Glenn utilizes creative stories - both allegorical and personal – each with an introduction and commentary. Questions are also provided for personal reflection and group discussion.

No doubt, this book is most especially suited for teachers and students participating in some form of catechesis, especially those who are considering or preparing to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church.

## Chapter IX

*In this chapter, I would like to address a problem which has plagued the world of religion probably from “day one”; namely, prejudice. As the word clearly indicates, we are speaking about pre-judging someone or something. Our own experience teaches us prejudice often has many ingredients; for example, ignorance, fear, and suspicion. Strictly speaking, to judge some things strictly at face value is not always a bad thing. Soldiers and law officers are trained to size up situations from what they observe and act accordingly. However, the common usage of the word we accept as something to be avoided. So, as I have introduced this subject, may I inquire if any reader can say they are completely immune from this social disease? Disease it is – and we’ll call “Prejuditis”. It is curious indeed to note that history – indeed, our present history - clearly attests that the most severe cases of prejuditis affects religious people.*

*Unlike most of the stories in this book the following story is not from my imagination but memory. While this particular encounter happened some thirty years ago, the basic theme has been replayed at various times and places. I must admit, some of the more aggressive encounters I have had involved people who should have known better. These are the “used-to-be” Catholics who came to “see the light”. Yet, when they see someone light me, they see red.*

*After many such encounters, I’ve become an expert in diagnosing “prejuditis”, so I do my best to supply what is a most effective to cure this most common affliction. It’s made up of a mixture of patience, kindness, truth, and humor!*

## THE SAME THING

As I stepped up the crumbling cement steps of the apartment building and entered into the dimly lit entryway, I instinctively held my breath. Back in the eighties, South Bronx tenements were neither very safe nor very clean. Sure enough, I was immediately accosted by an acrid smell; no doubt the work of some janitor attempting to clean up a puddle of urine with bleach and a musty mop. The dingy walls of the hallway had obviously proved too tempting for some graffiti artist named “Chico”. He had generously “tagged” the entire wall with thick red and black markers. The hall ended abruptly with a series of steps, a narrow landing, and a doorway which led into a well lit lobby. The area was surprisingly clean but Spartan in appearance. There was an ornate marble fireplace surrounded by floral-designed tile work, plaster crown molding and medallions which lined the walls. It clearly hadn’t been used in years, but spoke of an elegant past. Of course the lobby was now devoid of its former furnishings—standing torch lamps, upholstered chairs, and probably a Persian-style carpet. The empty room appeared to have little purpose except to amplify the clinking of keys, turning of locks, and the slam of metal apartment doors. In short, it sounded like a prison.

Being street smart, the thought of using the elevator to reach the fourth floor never crossed my mind. Stairways have two modes of escape – a closed elevator has none, so I naturally made my way towards the stairs. Besides the elevator didn’t even sound safe as the cables squeaked on the pulleys while the elevator lumbered down to the lobby. Once it arrived, the doors opened haltingly with a jarring thud and scraping sound; and out walked an attractive Hispanic woman in her twenties. I was hoping she wouldn’t be frightened running into a stranger looking like the grim reaper in her apartment lobby. While we Franciscans are very used to looking medieval, people who see friars on the street or subway have plenty of reactions. Some do a quick double-take, while others put on a stone face and walk past as if I’m invisible. Kids are usually the most honest—they always stop, stare, point, and giggle.

So here we are; me the monk and she who is casually exiting her elevator. When the young woman looked up and saw me, she stopped as though hitting an invisible wall. Seeing her wide eyes and open mouth, I quickly accessed the situation, gave her a super bright smile, and shouted: “Good Morning!” Well, my somewhat theatrical greeting echoed so loudly in the empty lobby it

nearly frightened me! She recouped quite quickly and looked me over head-to-toe, and with one hand on her hip she tilted her head and said: “And who are you?” I extended my arms and with a smile said: “*Soy un Franciscano!*” Ignoring my effort to be both friendly and culturally connected, she screwed up her face and said: “And what’s that?”

“You never heard of the Franciscans?” I responded with a feigned look of disbelief. Yet, in order not to expose her ignorance, I asked in a bright and bouncy manner: “You’re from Puerto Rico, right?” She completely ignored my inquiry, and making no attempt whatever to hide her annoyance, she said with a hint of disdain: “Oh, you must be my grandmother’s religion. I used to be that but now I’m Christian!” Now, I must admit, while I have heard this comment often enough it always irks me. However, even though I didn’t want her to know I was annoyed, I did hit the ball sharply back over the net: “Hey, come on, I’m Christian – and so is your *abuela* (grandmother)” She lowered her eyes, tightened her lips, and shaking her head stated: “It’s not the same thing.”

Just to keep our conversation from slipping from dialogue into debate, I introduced myself offering her my hand: “Hi, I’m Father Glenn!” She reluctantly stuck out a limp and almost lifeless hand, and mumbled: “I’m Sonia.” With the hope of directing our conversation off of the thin ice of religion, I inquired whether she knew the woman I was there to visit. Ignoring my question completely she immediately returned to religion and shouted: “My grandmother worships idols! The Bible says that’s a sin!” I knew immediately she was referring to her Catholic grandmother’s statues. Not attempting to hide my cynicism I asked her: “Well, what gods or goddesses does your grandmother actually worship? Sweeping aside my question, as if letting go of some dark secret, she blurted out: “She even kisses them!”

In my imagination I saw the whole scene: a sweet old lady kissing her fingertips and then touching a statue of Mary or the Sacred Heart. Slightly annoyed at this young woman’s stupidity, I let my Brooklyn upbringing slip out and gave her a New York “ya-gotta-be-out-of-ya-mind” look. I groaned: “Come on, Sonia, you’re Latina and I’m Italian, we kiss everything – even ourselves!” With that I put my thumb and two fingers together, kissed them and tossed them in the air as if to say: “*Perfetto!*” I thought the funny example would ease the tension and she would laugh. She didn’t. “It’s not the same thing”, she replied looking down at her feet.

As this was certainly not my first Catholic bashing rodeo, I just knew that the whole “praying to dead people” would soon be dragged up—and it was. As expected, she complained: “Where in the Bible does it say we should pray to Mary and the saints? I go right to Jesus!” So, as

I have done so many times, I calmly and carefully attempted to lay out the pieces of the puzzle one by one. I spoke about the difference between veneration, which is praying through Mary and the saints, and adoration, that is, praying to God. I spoke to her of the universality of the Church and also of various cultural religious expressions; for example, Swedes and Sicilians express themselves differently. Well, despite my best efforts Sonia wasn't buying anything because she wasn't listening to anything; I tried to make it more personal. "Sonia", I said ever so gently, "when your *abuela* dies and goes to heaven to be with Jesus, do you think her love and concern for you will actually end? Don't you think it will only increase?" If we ask for the prayers of one another here on earth why not ask those in heaven to pray? She now folded her arms, looked up at the ceiling and shaking her head said with emphasis: "It's not the same thing!"

Sonia then began to criticize her grandmother's praying the rosary. She said: "The Bible says we shouldn't pray like the pagans", you know saying the same thing over and over". I replied: "Sonia, Saint Paul is speaking of vain repetition; heartfelt repetition isn't outlawed, in fact, even some of the psalms repeat phrases like "Bless the Lord". "Besides, what church do you attend?" I asked. She replied, "Pentecostal" (I knew it) "Pentecostal!" I replied, "And you're telling me your grandmother repeats herself? In your church don't people say over and over: "Praise the Lord!", or "Father God", or "Alleluia!"? Evidently I hit a nerve because Sonia suddenly leaned in, looked me square in my eyes, and with one stiff finger wagging back and forth like a windshield wiper between our noses said: "It's-not-the-same-thing".

By now I was getting somewhat frustrated; while I believe there is often real benefit when Christians dialogue, there's no benefit when they argue. Besides, it was getting late and I still had to make my visit. I told Sonia I had to go, and was about to ask her if she wanted to share a prayer. But, lo and behold, wonder of wonders – I noticed something! There it was, dangling ever so delicately from a silver chain around her neck - a small oval photo of a smiling young soldier. I went in for the kill.

Playing the dumb monk, I pointed to the locket, and asked with all the innocence I could muster: "Oh, Sonia, who's that?" My simple question worked like a magic wand; right before my eyes my sassy South Bronx boxer became like Bambi. In a flash she was transformed from cold marble into warm mush. "Oh, that's Oscar" she said gazing down and fingering the locket with the sweetest Snow White smile. Still admiring the smiling face of her knight in shining armor, she added: "He's my boyfriend and when he comes home from the army we're getting married."

Speaking about soldiers, I had her right in my sights, so I smiled and said, “Sonia, if I ask you a question, will you promise to tell me the truth?” She looked up from her locket, tilted her head back a bit and said, “Yeah, what do you want to know? Now it was my turn to lean in. Locking into her eyes, like a lawyer at the witness stand, I didn’t ask but stated the question - slowly and solemnly: “Now, Sonia, tell me the truth, have you ever – ever - kissed that picture of Oscar?” The block-busting missile hit its mark. My question caught her so much off guard; she fell backward, steadying herself with one hand on the wall. Covering her mouth she bent over and started laughing. Direct hit, I thought.

Now I started to laugh. There we stood by the elevator, still strangers yet laughing like old friends. While I was laughing I kept pointing at her saying “Come on, Sonia, tell me the truth! Sonia, tell me the truth!” Sonia, bent over and laughing, kept repeating, “It’s not the same thing. It’s not the same thing.”

But we both knew it was.

### **AS I SEE IT**

Although it’s been years since our chance encounter in a South Bronx tenement, I’ve often thought about Sonia. I wonder whether she ever got married to Oscar or where she’s living. I also wonder if she remembers me - “the monk” – which just might bring about a little smile. Yet, while both of us have both grown older, have we both grown wiser? While wisdom is not restricted to age, often enough it is the fruit of time, together with knowledge and personal experience. Many of us older folk must admit that time has tempered the intensity and impetuosity of youth. The kind word people often use is “mellow”. When we’re young we enthusiastically swashbuckle through life, confidently sitting on our high horse - when old you’re just happy to stay on the saddle! No doubt, one of the sure signs of attaining wisdom is the ability to thoughtfully respond and not emotionally react to others. Young people are often too sure of themselves lacking docility which demands listening and the willingness to learn.

I must admit, I am often amazed that in a century dubbed “the information age”, so many people can be so ignorant. In regards to the Church, the people who appear to have the most opinions have the least knowledge. One has only to open one’s eyes and ears and minds to see the towering cathedrals, gaze upon the magnificent art, hear the stunning symphonies, read the

profound wisdom, and witness the dazzling depths of holiness – all this – and more - engendered over the centuries through individuals who professed a faith which was not only old – but ancient – indeed, apostolic.

Yet, from the very beginning – with the arrival of the one who said, “I am the light of the world” – came the prince of darkness. The prologue of Saint John puts it this way: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”. However, the powers of darkness has not ceased for a moment in its effort to do this. Beginning with the Sanhedrin, and soon followed by the emperors of Rome, persecution accompanied the Church for the first three hundred years. Quite frankly, it hasn’t ceased as every continent and country has its long list of martyrs – Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and even in Mexico the Church systematic persecutions attempted to extinguish the light which shines in the darkness. Marxism, Communism, Nazism, Fascism, Freemasonry and radical Islam - strange bedfellows who have one great enemy – the Church of Jesus Christ. For all those who rejoice when the Church suffers, may I suggest you consider your comrades.

Speaking about Communism, in a city like Moscow one can see hundreds of Orthodox churches crowned with huge gold-gilded and sometimes swirling onion-domes. Inside, one enjoys the sight and scent of brown beeswax tapers illuminating scores of ancient icons. On Sunday the entire church is filled with worshipers standing, then bowing and crossing themselves as a choir responds with melodic harmony to the priest celebrant vested in shimmering gold. Meanwhile, clouds of incense from silver censers billow and ascend to the icon-covered ceiling. As the liturgy is long, you step out for some air. Across the street is a long line of cement block buildings – housing provided for the public constructed by the Communists. What is evident in their outward design no doubt the same inside – let’s call it “practical ugliness”. How and why is it that the world within the apostolic faith looks, sounds, and even smells like heaven; while the world of its enemies looks, sounds, and I sure, even sometimes even smells like hell?

Yes, there is a disease called “prejuditis”. Those affected by this virus display the following symptoms: they get a thick skull, a stiff neck, and a sharp tongue. Oftentimes the arm extends outward and the person begins to point. Also, many times, the heels dig themselves into the ground. Vision is impaired in two ways: becoming myopic or short-sighted. Hearing is also affected as the person has difficulty hearing anything but their own voice.

Prejudice certainly can be used against the Church, but it also can be exhibited within the Church. No one is immune to this invisible and insidious virus. For many, the disease remains

dormant yet often emerges unexpectedly. To protect oneself from infection one only has to receive an inoculation of education. But be careful, even in today's information age, a lot of misinformation makes its way around cyberspace. In this regard, the best advice is going to the horse's mouth. If only my friend Sonia did her homework, we would have had a more constructive conversation and a healthier encounter. Perhaps she would have realized that having a strong opinion and possessing a strong knowledge are not always the same thing.

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Fr. Glenn Sudano, CFR

Saint Joseph Friary

523 W 142 St.

New York, NY 10031

[www.franciscanfriars.com](http://www.franciscanfriars.com)