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Burn the Book

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Abstract: This article is an autobiographical sketch of di Francesca's life-long search for the Church after finding a damaged Book of Mormon in an ash barrel.

I was born September 23, 1888, in the town of Gratteri, province of Palermo, Sicily, a son of Joseph D. and Marianne D. Maria Francesca. On February 22, 1892, my mother passed away; and with my brother Antonine and my sister Josephine. I went to live with my mother's parents.

When I was seven years of age, I attended elementary school. My grandfather, wishing that I might receive training of a religious nature, arranged for me to be taught by his cousin, Vincent Serio. I was so successful in developing the art of reading scripture that by the time I was 11 years of age my teacher praised me well, saying that I was blessed to have such a great gift.

In November 1900, I was permitted to enroll in a high school run by a religious order, and I studied religion there until 1905. Meanwhile, my brother Antonine, who had emigrated to New York City, invited me to come to America. So, at 17 years of age, I sailed from Naples, arriving in New York on October 12, 1905. There I met a friend of my brother, Ariel Debellon, a pastor of the Italian branch of one of the Protestant churches, who engaged me as a teacher to serve members of his congregation. He was so impressed with my gift in reading the scriptures that he suggested I attend Knox College in New York City. I followed his advice and received my degree in religion November 24, 1909.

As I think back over the events of my life leading up to a cold morning in February 1910, I cannot escape the feeling that God had been mindful of my existence. That morning the caretaker of the Italian chapel delivered a note to me from the pastor, advising me he was ill in bed and asking me to come to his house, as he had important matters to discuss with me regarding the affairs of the parish.

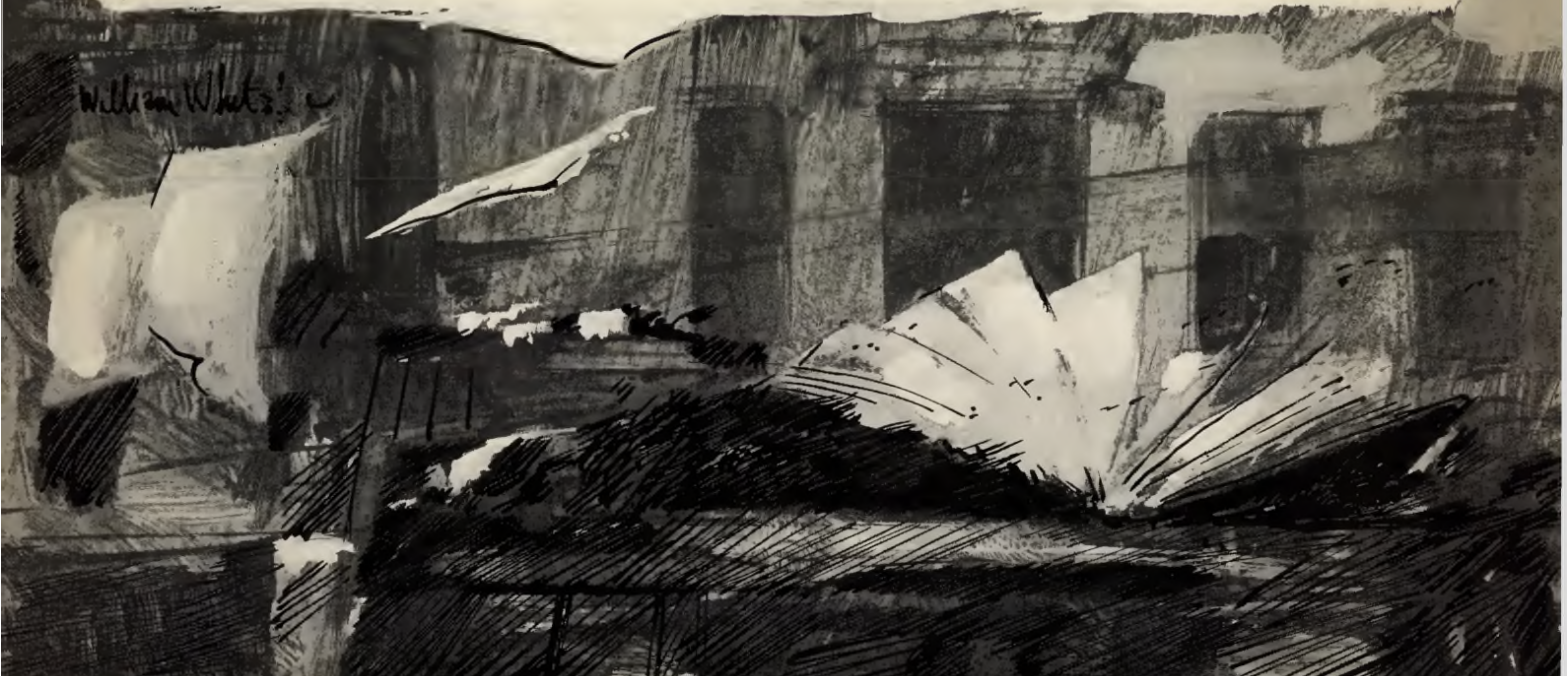
As I walked down Broadway, the strong wind from the open sea blew cold against me, so I held my head down and turned my face away from the wind. It was then I saw what appeared to be a book lying on top of an open barrel of ashes, set there to be picked up by the garbage collection wagon. The form of the pages and the manner in which they were bound gave me the impression that it was a religious book. Curious, I picked up the book and knocked it against the side of the barrel to shake the ashes from its pages. The book was written in the English language. I looked for the frontispiece, but it had been torn away.


As I stood there with the book in my hands, the fury of the wind turned the pages, and one by one, the names Nephi, Mosiah, Alma, Moroni, and Isaiah appeared before my eyes. Since the cold wind was bitter, I hurriedly wrapped the soiled book in a newspaper and continued my journey.

At the parish house I gave a few words of comfort to my colleague Scarillo and agreed to the services he requested of me during his illness. As I walked back to my own lodgings, my mind dwelt on the book in my hand and the strange names I had read. Who were these men? Who was this prophet Isaiah? Was he the one I had read about in the Bible, or was he some other Isaiah?

Back in my room I carefully turned the torn pages and came to the words of Isaiah, which I read most carefully. What could be the name of the church that taught such doctrine in words so easily understood? The cover of the book and the title page were missing. I read the declaration of witnesses in the opening pages and was strongly impressed by the strength of their testimonies, but there was no other clue to the book's identity.

William Whitt's





I purchased some alcohol and cotton from the drugstore beneath my lodgings and began cleaning the soiled pages. Then for several hours I read what was written in the book. When I had read chapter ten of the book of Moroni, I locked the door of my room; and with the book held in my hands, I knelt down and asked God, the Eternal Father, in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, to tell me if the book was of God. As I prayed, I felt my body becoming cold. Then my heart began to pound, and a feeling of warmth and gladness came over me and filled me with such joy that I cannot find words to express. I knew that the words of the book came from God.

I continued my services in the parish, but my preaching was tinged with the new words I had found in the book. The members of my congregation were so interested in my words that they became dissatisfied with the sermons of my colleagues, and they asked them why they did not preach the sweet arguments of Don Vincent. This was the beginning of troubles for me. When members began leaving the chapel during the sermons of my colleagues and remained when I occupied the pulpit, my colleagues became angry with me.

The beginning of real discord began Christmas eve, 1910. In my sermon that evening, I told the story of the birth and mission of Jesus Christ as given in my new book. When I had finished, some of my colleagues, without any shadow of shame, publicly contradicted all I had said. The absurdities of their assertions so upset me that I openly rebelled against them. They denounced me and turned me over to the committee of censure for disciplinary action.

When I appeared before this committee, the members gave me what was supposed to be fatherly advice. They counseled me to burn the book, which they said

was of the devil, since it was the cause of so much trouble and had destroyed the harmony of the pastoral brothers. I replied by giving my witness that the book they asked me to burn was the word of God, but because of the missing pages I did not know the name of the church that had brought forth the book. I declared that if I were to burn the book, I would displease God. I would rather go out of the congregation of the church than offend him. When I had so stated, the president of the council ended the discussion, stating the council would decide on the matter later.

It was not until 1914 that I was once again brought before the council. The vice venerable spoke in a friendly tone, suggesting that the sharp words of the committee members at the previous hearing may have provoked me, which was regrettable, since they all loved me and were mindful of the valuable assistance I had always so freely given. However, he said, I must remember that obedience—complete and absolute—is the rule. The long suffering of the members, to whom I had continued to preach falsehoods, had come to an end, and I must burn the book.

In reply, I stated I could not deny the words of the book nor would I burn it, since in doing so I would offend God. I said I looked forward with joy to the time when the church to which the book belonged would be made known to me and I would become a part of it. At this, the vice venerable cried, "Enough! Enough!" He then read the decision that had been made by the council: I was to be stripped of my position as a pastor of the church and of every right and privilege I had previously enjoyed.

Three weeks later I was called before the supreme synod. After giving me an opportunity to retract my previous statements, which I refused to do, the synod

Burn the Book

... or be cut off
from the church forever,
I was told.

By Don Vincent di Francesca

Illustration by Bill Whittaker

confirmed the judgment of the council. I was thus completely cut off from the body of the church.

In November 1914, I was called into the Italian army and sent to the Port of Naples. I saw action in France, where I experienced all of the sadness and suffering associated with the battles of World War I. Remembering the lessons of the book I had read, I related to some of the men in my company the story of the people of Ammon—how they refused to shed the blood of their brothers and buried their arms rather than be guilty of so great crimes. The chaplain reported me to the colonel, and the next day I was escorted to the colonel's office. He asked me to tell him the story I had related to the soldiers, as it is recorded in the twenty-fourth chapter of Alma. Then he asked me how I had come into possession of the book, and why I retained a book written in the English language and published by an unnamed church. I received as punishment a ten-day sentence on bread and water, with the order that I was to speak no more of the book and its stories.

After the end of the war I returned to New York, where I met an old friend who was a pastor of my former church and who knew the history of my troubles. He felt I had been unfairly dealt with, and he began interceding for me with members of the synod. I was finally admitted to the congregation as a lay member. As an experiment, it was agreed that I should accompany one of the pastors on a mission to New Zealand and to Australia.

In Sydney, Australia, we met some Italian immigrants who asked questions about the errors in the translations of the Bible as published by the Catholic Church. They were not satisfied with the answers given by my companion, and he became angry with them. Then they asked me about it, and, knowing I

had the truth in the Book of Mormon, I once again told the story of Christ's appearance to the people of the land described there, and that Christ had said, "That other shecp I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd." (3 Ne. 15:17.) When they asked me where I had learned such teachings, I told them of the book I had found. The story was sweet to them but very bitter for my colleague. He reported me to the synod, and once again their previous judgment was confirmed, and I was cut off from the church forever. Soon after, I returned to Italy.

In May 1930, while I was seeking in a French dictionary for some information, I suddenly saw the entry "Mormon." I read the words carefully and found that a Mormon Church had been established in 1830 and that this church operated a university at Provo, Utah. I wrote to the president of the university at Provo, asking for information about the book and its missing pages. I received an answer two weeks later, and was told that my letter had been passed on to the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and that he would inform me about the book with the missing pages, which book did indeed belong to the Mormon Church.

On June 16, 1930, President Heber J. Grant answered my letter and sent a copy of the Book of Mormon, which had been translated into the Italian language in 1852 by President Lorenzo Snow while he was a missionary. President Grant informed me that Elder John A. Widtsoe was president of the Church's European Mission, with headquarters in Liverpool, England, and he would give my request to him. A few days later, Elder Widtsoe wrote to me from Liverpool and sent me a pamphlet that contained the



story of the Prophet Joseph Smith, telling of the gold plates and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. At long last I had learned the rest of the story begun so long ago when, guided by the hand of God, I found the torn book lying on top of a barrel of ashes on a street in New York City.

On June 5, 1932, Elder Widtsoe came to Naples to baptize me, but a revolution between the Fascists and anti-Fascists on the island of Sicily had broken out, and the police at Palermo refused permission for me to leave the island. I was thus denied a chance for baptism at that time.

The following year Elder Widtsoe asked me to translate the Joseph Smith pamphlet into Italian and to have 1,000 copies published. I took my translation to a printer, Joseph Gussio, who took the material to the Catholic bishop of the diocese of Cefalu. The bishop ordered the printer to destroy the material. I brought suit against the printer, but all I received from the court was an order to him to return the original booklet, which he had thrown into some waste paper in a cellar.

When Elder Widtsoe was released as president of the mission in 1934, I started correspondence with Elder Joseph F. Merrill, who had succeeded him. He put my name on the mailing list for the *Millennial Star*, which I received until 1940 when the subscription was stopped because of World War II. In January 1937, Elder Richard R. Lyman, successor to President Merrill, wrote to me, advising me that he and Elder Hugh B. Brown would be in Rome on a certain day and I could meet them there and be baptized. The letter was delayed because of war conditions, and I did not receive it in time.

From then until 1949, I was cut off from all news of the Church, but I remained a faithful follower and

preached the gospel of the dispensation of the fulness of times. I had copies of the standard works, and I translated chapters into Italian and sent them to acquaintances with the greeting: "Good day. The morning breaks—Jehovah speaks!"

On February 13, 1949, I resumed correspondence with Elder Widtsoe at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. Elder Widtsoe answered my letter October 3, 1950, explaining that he had been in Norway. I sent him a long letter in reply in which I asked him to help me to be quickly baptized, because I felt that I had proven myself to be a faithful son and pure servant of God, observing the laws and commandments of his kingdom. Elder Widtsoe asked President Samuel E. Bringham of the Swiss Mission if he would go to Sicily to baptize me. On January 18, 1951, President Bringham arrived on the island, and I was baptized at Imerese, Province of Palermo. According to the records of the Church, this was apparently the first baptism performed on the Island of Sicily. Then on April 28, 1956, I entered the temple at Bern, Switzerland, and received my endowments.

At last, to be in the presence of my Heavenly Father! I felt I had now proved faithful in my second estate, after having searched for and found the true Church by means of an unknown book that I found so many years ago, lying on an open barrel of ashes in the city of New York. ○

Elder Don Vincent di Francesca died November 18, 1966, at Gesta Grätten (Palmero), Italy, in the province of his birth, after a lifetime search for the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

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