



The Fitz Files

DEVON'S TREASURED BROADCASTING LEGEND DAVID FITZGERALD SHARES STORIES OLD AND NEW WITH READERS

I met the Pope and the earth shook... a day to remember

IT was in October of 2016 when I last stood in St Peter's Square in Rome.

On that visit I was transfixed, listening to the start of an unmistakable peel of bells scattering a large cloud of doves which had settled on the roof of the Basilica.

I say unmistakable as I had heard the bells on many occasions, having trailed around the Vatican on at least three tourist trips before. But on that day, I would get a different perspective. Within moments the bells were behind me, muffled by the vastness of the structure of the church as I entered the smallest country in the world, a mere 120 acres.

I had been invited to a symposium on modern day slavery held within the Vatican with law enforcement agencies, national police and military leaders from around the world. At the time, Pope Francis had gone on record calling modern slavery "a crime against humanity".

In a press release of the period, the Home Office estimated that there were around 13,000 potential victims of modern slavery in the UK alone. Quite what that figure is today is a mystery, some estimates put it as a great deal more. Traffickers and organised criminals exploit millions of human beings around the world as commodities, forcing men, women and children to work in areas like prostitution and sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude, organ trafficking and organised begging.

The fact that you can place a monetary figure on a human being is revolting but the value of a slave today is dramatically cheaper than those traded in the 1850s.

It is no wonder Pope Francis welcomed those who wished to crush the trade, one of whom was Shaun Sawyer, the then Devon and Cornwall Chief Constable who had paved the way for my visit.

The meeting itself was placed in one of the few buildings at the rear of the church, to the right of a small car park which edged the Santa Marta building, a modern block built in 1996 which functions as a guest house for clergy having business with the Holy See, and will act as the temporary residence of members of the College of Cardinals while par-

ticipating in a papal conclave to elect the new Pope. It was also the chosen residence of Francis, a few simple rooms rather than the official grand living quarters with the main structure of the Vatican.

It was here that I came across the first story that really made me smile about our pontiff. One of the delegates was staying within the same building and looked up while having breakfast to see the Pope sitting down to a bowl of cereal in a pair of running shoes. Why not! If that was the way he wished to start his day, who are we to question.

I refrained from the inevitable pun: "Was he eating Coco Popes?"

But it did go through my mind.

The next was that car park in which about half a dozen cars were lined up. I had heard that he drove a Fiat 500 (wrong) so I went in search under the gaze of a member of the Swiss Guard and there it was. A small white Fiat 500 parked in the shade of the Santa Marta shadow. A simple car for a simple man.

However, I later discovered that he actually drove an ancient Renault 4L, much to the worry of his security detail. The Fiat was not his, endorsed by the fact that there was a child seat in the rear!

The meeting was as distressing as it was informative, with victims of slavery present to give their own story. As it came to a close, the doors opened and a papal official arrived to usher us out, we thought to disperse for the day, but the snake of candidates ... and me... were corralled towards yet another block-like building and into a waiting room.

It soon became apparent that His Holiness was about to greet the main organisers and suddenly there he was. A buzz went round the room, an excited wave of energy exuded from a group of people who you would not have expected to have been effected by a small figure in white seated in a red velvet chair.

To my left was a rather stocky gentleman who turned out to be one of the top operatives of the CIA, in front of us was his opposite in the FBI and sandwiched in between was the head of US homeland security. All were straining to get a look at the small clutch of figures being presented. I was on the end of the row of



Fitz meets Pope Francis in the Vatican in 2016



seats so had a great view.

"Can you take my camera and get a shot," was the request from CIA.

"And me," said FBI.

I did and returned the cameras. Homeland security turned and smiled.

"They have got your fingerprints now, oldest trick in the book."

I was about to question that odd statement when someone slammed a door and the chandeliers above our heads swayed gently but there was

no time to question that odd experience as the guests were standing, I thought to leave, but to my surprise all were being presented.

Within moments I stood in front of the head of my church and took hold of his hand, he thanked me for coming and handed me a special rosary in a packet embossed with the papal crest. I wished my father could have seen me or my parish priest or indeed my great friend Frank Kelly, the man who had played Father Jack in

the *Father Ted* series, still a Catholic after all of the ridicule.

I left the building and stood in a slight daze in the courtyard, analysing what had just happened. Life had stood still for a moment and then ... reality ... as I switched on my mobile to call my wife on what had been a momentous moment.

Reality came in the form of two messages and a text. The first was from my greatest friend to tell me his beloved father-in-law had died. The next was from a vaguely familiar voice, the wife of my only other direct living relative, my cousin. That title had expired, as he had just passed away!

And the text? The text was from my producer at the radio station which read... "You are in an earthquake, are you alright, we haven't done a risk assessment."

I looked around me, where the Swiss Guard were inspecting a large crack in the roadway which was spewing a foul smelling water. It then dawned on me that the door slamming had been the quake, the chandeliers the only inside evidence of Rome shaking. The piece of the courtyard I was standing on had dropped by about two inches.

Later as I walked back to my hotel, the door slammed again, an after-shock but after that... quiet... quiet in one of the noisiest cities on earth.