

# God save (!!)

the **POPE** (!)

By Kevin (!!) O'Connor

## WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

*“God Save the Pope,” by Kevin O’Connor is a tale as old as Punk as existed.*

*Three bandmates in Dublin focus all their angst, emotions, and frustrations into a grand gesture by playing their music on the rooftops to protest (perhaps protest in the wrong word, to assault the simulacrums that affront the Irish people and humanity) the Pope’s visit.*

*What I like about this story is how it taps into the fight against improper control as well as the frustrations people experience as they come to new realizations about themselves and their ideas. Whether actually experienced or not, I don’t think there is anyone who doesn’t have some sort of thematic connection between fighting for a cause and coming to terms with the reality of the fight – more often than not time goes on and the flame goes out. The existential comprehension that O’Connor brings to light is universal here and, I think, one of this story’s biggest strengths, “Our moment of glory never arrived. It would have been righteous. I think it would have made us famous. Maybe God was looking after his number one guy after all. As long as it took us to get our gear into the building, it felt like a whole lot longer getting it out.” It’s almost as if O’Connor captured a sighed and held it close because if you exhale not only are you acknowledging despair but also hope leaving.*

*O’Connor has done some great work here crafting a story that celebrates the exuberant feeling of making change and the fall from the high of seeing valiant efforts trampled, crushed, and staying the status quo. There is care in his undertaking and thoughtfulness in its universality.*

*You can start burning the motherfucker down by reading this story – you won’t regret it.*

*Enjoy.*

*Five Stars.*

### **QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)**

‘Fuck me it’s hot,’ said Gordon. In the small time it had taken us to walk from William’s flat, Gordon was already sunburnt on the back of his neck and his arms. Something to remember for when we tour hot countries, I thought. William had some weed and rolled it into a three-skinner joint. There were families out walking around and a group of lads playing soccer nearby. I would have nearly suggested we join in if it wasn’t for the fact we all had on Doc Martens.

- The Pope is a Dildo – A blistering attack on the Catholic Church’s hypocritical stance on homosexuality and their harbouring of paedophile priests. 2m13s.
- The Pope Dildo is Big – A sorrowful lament of the extent the Catholic Church was able to exert its draconic power over the country. 1m15s.
- The Dildo is Mine – Here, we claim ownership of Ireland’s shameful past. We acknowledge that while the Church is responsible for unspeakable atrocities in Ireland’s past, it wouldn’t have been possible to commit these atrocities without the support of the general population. 1m23s.

Word Count: 3574

God Save the Pope by Kevin O’Connor

‘They’re sucking his *what?*’

We were on Facebook, promoting our next gig. Facebook may be a tool of mass observation and oppression, but it’s useful for news and stuff. The Pope’s head, bizarrely, was being printed onto lollipops to celebrate his upcoming visit. And then sold to children.

‘That’s fucked up,’ said William. ‘It’s *Freudian*.’ We were in William’s flat, which was composed of three rooms: a kitchen-cum-hallway, a toilet, and a room with two bunk beds. He read on. When he told us how much the visit was going to cost, I nearly shat.

‘Thirty *million* euros?’ I said. Money may be an abstract concept that doesn’t mean anything, but that’s no reason to waste it. ‘That’s bullshit.’

‘Do they not realize how many houses that could build?’ asked Gordon. ‘Don’t they even care about the housing crisis?’

‘Don’t be a dick, Gordon,’ I said. ‘The government doesn’t give a shit about the housing crisis. They’re one of the *causes*.’ That was true. We lived in Dublin: if you want to make it as a band you have to live in Dublin. There’s no punk scene in the rest of Ireland, but in Dublin you can gig semi-regularly, even if you don’t get paid. None of us could afford a decent flat. I shared a room above a takeaway with two Brazilians. The place was noisy until 3:00 a.m. and reeked of greasy chip fat.

‘What do you mean, Henry?’ said Gordon. I should clarify, my real name isn’t Henry – that’s a ponce name. Henry is my stage name – Henry Vomit. Gordon’s stage name is Gordon Fistfight. William is William Nosebleed. We called ourselves by our stage names so by the time we made it, we’d be able to act like they were our real names in interviews.

‘What I mean is, look at how much money the government has right now. We’re owed billions by Apple and Google and all the rest, but the government won’t take it. They want to drive all the ordinary, decent people out of Dublin. Fianna Dee and Fine Dum have the same vision for a capital full of accountants, lawyers and investment bankers, they just have different ideas of how to achieve it. Whatever of *real* Dublin that wasn’t mauled to death by the Celtic Tiger is being smothered to death by Foreign Direct Investment.’ Most of

that I'd heard in a pub near the college. The students were wankers, but sometimes they sounded impressive.

'We have to do something,' said William. 'We can't let them get away with this. Are there any protests?'

'Fuck the protests,' said Gordon. 'Any mass protest is going to be appropriated by the mainstream, soft-cock centrists. If we do something, it should be our own thing.' That was good, I thought. At least, it sounded good, and it made up for his forgetting of the housing conspiracy.

William's roommates came back. They were working stiff, and probably had boners for the Pope anyway, so we left to get cans and drink in the Phoenix Park. This was where they'd host the Pope. They were planning for half a million Catholics to attend – the last of the dying breed. We found a hill with a nice slope under some leafy trees.

'Fuck me it's hot,' said Gordon. In the small time it had taken us to walk from William's flat, Gordon was already sunburnt on the back of his neck and his arms. Something to remember for when we tour hot countries, I thought. William had some weed and rolled it into a three-skinner joint. There were families out walking around and a group of lads playing soccer nearby. I would have nearly suggested we join in if it wasn't for the fact we all had on Doc Martens.

'What are we going to do about this Pope thing?' asked William.

'We should moon him,' said Gordon. 'Imagine showing that paedo our big arses, waving at him from up on a massive building or something.' He sucked the last few swigs out of his can in one hungry gulp and belched. 'He'd probably cum in his pants.'

'Does the Pope wear pants? I thought it's like a dress or something,' said William.

‘Well, his Pope robe then,’ said Gordon. ‘We should moon him from on top of a big building, make him cum in his robes. Then kick the shit out of him.’

‘I’d kick the shit out of him if I could,’ I said. ‘We’d probably get murdered by his bodyguards first. They’d probably shoot us in the hole if we mooned him.’

‘Probably a law that says you can’t moon the Pope,’ William agreed.

We finished the joint so he rolled another one. I watched his fingers cleverly roll the tobacco and weed into a tightly packed cylinder and swiftly flip one edge of the paper under the contents and roll it tightly back up. Bass players roll the best spliffs.

‘That’s a good idea though,’ I said. ‘The arses, and the building. Maybe we could make a load of posters?’

‘Posters are a waste of time. Anything good would just get taken down anyway.’

‘Or set up a projector?’

‘Project an image onto a building?’ asked Gordon.

‘Yeah like a film,’ I said. ‘Like, out of a window, all images of children and priests, and Magdalene laundries and nuns. Words like “rapist”, and “cover-up” all over the side of the building. If we hid the projector they wouldn’t be able to block it.’

William sparked the joint and smoked it thoughtfully. ‘That’d be good if it was at night,’ he said. ‘But *His Holiness* will be going through Dublin in the day. And what if it’s like this?’ He gestured at the sky. It was the middle of July. There were no clouds, not even a stray wisp. The grass hadn’t a drop of rain for months. It was yellow and crisp, like it had been microwaved on a low heat for days on end. When a piece snapped, it burst into a barely visible puff of yellowy vapour.

‘You can’t outshine the sun,’ said Gordon. I looked at him for a second. That was a good line. We could use it in a slower song we’d been writing as an attack on the concept of romantic love. We still needed a chorus and third verse. Gordon passed me the joint. I took it and lay down on my back. I sucked in the smoke and blew it out in a high plume where it hung above me. A new group arrived and sat near us. They took out speakers and blasted out some modern pop shite to soundtrack their cans. William watched them hungrily. Some of them were girls. I looked back at the sky as the song changed. *Here Comes the Sun*, by The Beatles came on.

‘I hate The Beatles,’ Gordon mumbled.

‘They have some tunes,’ William said. ‘And that time they played on the building was pretty cool.’

I sat bolt upright so fast my head swam. Sometimes when you’re stoned your mind makes excellent connections. I leaned over to Gordon to give him the joint, and swayed and toppled as I did so. I was more fucked than I thought.

‘Lads,’ I said, as Gordon accepted the joint. ‘I know what we have to do. We need to get onto a building, like The Beatles, with all of our equipment, and play our music over the Pope’s parade.’

William and Gordon both looked at each other. They started laughing. I don’t know what they were laughing at, but they high fived each other and Gordon spoke.

‘Henry, that’s a fucking class idea,’ he said. ‘That’s the best idea I’ve ever heard. Imagine how many people will hear us. We’ll ruin it for everyone.’

‘We’ll be famous,’ said William. ‘No, we’ll be infamous.’

I laughed in relief. I thought, at first, that they'd dismiss the idea. This was great. We would aurally assault every Catholic in Ireland with our political punk protest. Lesser bands would kill for that kind of exposure.

We drank until the sun went down. I kept thinking about throwing the end of our joints onto the dry grass and starting a forest fire, but I was worried that if we did, and we died in it ourselves, we'd never get to do our protest. Besides, while it would be very punk to burn down the park, I had to admit, it was the only nice place left in Dublin. If we burned it down, the place would probably never recover, and be turned by the council into a development zone for more luxury hotels.

We didn't talk anymore about the plan until over a week later. We ended up getting too stoned and drunk to talk about anything except music that day, and went on the sesh. By the time we'd sobered up, come down, and gotten over our hangovers, we'd lost valuable time.

The first thing we had to do was find a building that would suit our needs. When we got the route map, we walked along it to decide where we'd stage our assault. A lot of the buildings were owned by foreign companies. We thought about the idea of breaking in and locking them out, but we didn't really take it seriously. The security would be tight in those buildings, so we couldn't guarantee our success.

'I wouldn't mind a scrap with a security guard,' said Gordon.

'No,' I said. While a scrap with a security guard would be cool and probably add to our reputation, it was more important that we pulled this off. 'We only have one chance. We can't fuck it up.'

We found a derelict building on the route. The shop on the ground floor was an Asian food market, which we kept tabs on for a few days. They kept erratic opening hours,

apparently working on a clock and calendar that was completely their own. The building above it was empty and the windows lifeless. We figure it's owned by one of those US vulture funds. An office block stood across the road. One night, after the shop closed, we snuck around the back. The shop had a big bin, and we stood on it to smash one of the first-floor back windows. The window was only single glaze, framed by old wood, so it smashed easily enough. Once inside, we turned on the flashlights on our phones.

The place was caked in dust and mould. Despite the lingering heat of the day outside, the air was thick like old soup. It felt like stepping into a fridge. I didn't want to touch anything. Everything felt like it would leave a residue. The building had been empty for so long, and so bereft of life, that I couldn't imagine it ever being warm again.

'Let's get to the roof,' said Gordon. We made our way up through the building, scoping the rooms as we went. The stairs were wide and broad. They sagged and creaked under the weight of our feet as we tramped our way up. It was hard not to be humbled by the majesty of the place. These old Georgian buildings were built as expressions of power, with high ceilings, cornicing, and wide staircases and carved bannisters. Then I remembered this old house was built at first for a single family, then crammed with up to 30 families or more as a tenement, and I grew to hate it. They had always been monuments to rich domination over the poor. We reached the attic, where there was nothing separating the inside of the house from the bare elements except a thin membrane of overlapping slates. I had no qualms about smashing the weak old tiles off to make a hole so we could poke our heads through. I didn't smash it on the street side because I didn't want the damage to be visible from the road. Gordon squirmed through first.

'Come on up lads,' he said. 'You can stand.' We followed. The roof had a short incline before it flattened at the top, with a commanding view of the road. I made my way to

the crumbling chimney. I held on to it as William followed me up. Nobody would see us from the street. The glass-fronted office block opposite was empty, the high-earning drones gone home for the night.

‘What do ye reckon, boys?’ I asked.

‘This’ll do the job,’ said Gordon. His eagerness manifested itself in his restless leg.

‘There’ll be a big crowd here,’ said William. ‘Look at the size of the footpaths!’

‘And those traffic islands. We’ll have a proper *congregation*,’ said Gordon.

‘Will we be able to get the gear up here?’ I asked.

‘Definitely,’ said Gordon, testing the roof with his foot. ‘With me in the middle and one of you either side, it’ll hold us.’

We could run extension leads from the levels below up to the roof for power. Once we were back inside and our eyes readjusted to the gloom, I found a room with a lightbulb and tested the switches. The bulb flickered on and shone under a thick layer of dust. We had power in the building. The vultures were paying for something at least.

The most important thing, we felt, was to perfect a set-list. The tracks we had were all broadly anti-establishment, but none of them were specifically anti-church. We decided to write a whole new EP to get across exactly what our protest was about. We settled early on that the title of the EP would be “God Save the Pope,” which would link us most obviously to the punk movement for the pop-music listening herd of cattle that make up most of the population.

But as we wrote new songs, we found ourselves writing about the housing crisis, the refugee crisis, the crisis of late capitalism, the fabled economic boom that the politicians claimed was happening but we could see nothing of. In the end, only half the songs we wrote

were specifically about the Pope, but we had many more about Ireland's other issues.

However, since we were playing over the Pope, the set list we came up with for the gig was;

- The Pope is a Dildo – A blistering attack on the Catholic Church's hypocritical stance on homosexuality and their harbouring of paedophile priests. 2m13s.
- The Pope Dildo is Big – A sorrowful lament of the extent the Catholic Church was able to exert its draconic power over the country. 1m15s.
- The Dildo is Mine – Here, we claim ownership of Ireland's shameful past. We acknowledge that while the Church is responsible for unspeakable atrocities in Ireland's past, it wouldn't have been possible to commit these atrocities without the support of the general population. 1m23s.

For the next few weeks we practiced that set list non-stop. We got it note-and-word perfect, and meticulously planned how to set the equipment up, so we'd spend as little time as possible on the rooftop. Every second up there was a danger; danger of falling, danger of being spotted by security, danger of the Gardaí bursting in the doors and shutting us down. The week before the gig, we started to sneak our equipment into the house, piece by piece, under the cover of darkness. We didn't disturb the house at all, for fear of being discovered. We muscled amps, instruments and gear up to the tiny attic, and ran extension cables all over the house to prepare us for the day. The night before, none of us even drank. We couldn't risk oversleeping the parade.

I thought a lot about what this gig would mean. You see, for us, every gig wasn't just a way to make a bit of money, get the name out there and spread our music. Those are all fine ideals, and many people make very beautiful music that way, but our goal had never been to make music beautiful. Our music tried to give a name to an unnameable feeling. We tried to express an emotion that there is no word for. We played in basements and attics, to tiny

rooms crammed with sweaty people. People lost their minds, dancing and fighting and hugging and screaming and cheering. They bared their souls to us, and what we saw was a puddle of vomit containing fear, anger, loneliness, anxiety and isolation, desperation, longing, emptiness and dread, all mashed and mangled together to create something new, different and horrible. Our music was an expression of damaged souls.

The people below didn't know we were there. Up on the roof, I slung my guitar over my shoulder. I use a Dan Electro. William uses a Fender Precision his parents got him for his birthday when he was sixteen. Gordon sat behind his electric drums, which none of us were too pleased with, but they were the only ones we could get up there. Our amps were on, we tested a few notes. It all sounded good, so we turned the volume on them up all the way. We waited for the Pope to arrive in his little car. I fantasized about how cool it would be if our music broke the unbreakable glass that surrounded him. We would show the world that even God could bleed.

'There's fewer people than I expected,' Gordon said. There were a few scattered groups of devotees, but it seemed like they vastly overestimated how many people cared enough to come and see the old man.

'It doesn't matter,' I said. 'Actually, it's good. Less people means less noise to fight against.' We'd be even louder, even more obvious, that we had planned. We'd surely be headline news.

The first pair of Garda Motorcycles came around the corner. I nodded to William and Gordon. The time was upon us. Three pairs of motorcycles came ahead of two black jeeps, and there was the Holy Father himself, the Pontifex Maximus, the Pope. His procession came onto the street, and he waved and waved, smiling as if nothing was wrong. Something was about to be.

I roared; 'ONE TWO THREE FOUR,' and thundered my plectrum over the strings, Gordon beat his silicone pads and cymbals, and William slammed the thick strings of his bass. A solid wall of noise burst from the Dublin rooftop, and I could almost see the sonic wave race towards the Pope, a tidal wall of aural violence and belligerence, to finally topple the Christian regime that held Ireland in its grip for so many years.

And then, as our moment of ultimate triumph and infamy dawned, we heard a tremendous crack. Our amps fell silent. Gordon's drums lost all their power. We looked at each other, clueless. I strummed my guitar, but the only sound it made was a tinny twang, barely audible over the sound from the street below.

'I've got nothing,' I said.

'Is the mic working?' William was bent over his amp. We frantically checked our cables, amps, PA system. We had no power. We had no *voice*. We scrambled to find out what had failed us, how to fix it. The show must go on, I desperately thought.

Gordon ran to the edge of the roof. 'He's still moving!'

I whipped the guitar off over my shoulder and slid into the hole in the roof. I followed our cables back to the sockets, expecting to find them fallen out, or perhaps even an absentee landlord stood there holding it. I found them all still in the wall, so I switched them around, knowing that the guys would play as soon as they got power. When I didn't hear anything, I ran to the switch board. Nothing I did worked. Eventually, I gave up and we sat on the rooftop as the procession snaked its way past us.

In the ten or so years of dereliction, nobody had been into the building but us. There were no maintenance men checking in on the place, so the wiring was left to the mercy of time. I've thought over and over again that we should have tested everything properly, but at the time it seemed more important that we not get caught. The power demanded by our full, loud

performance fried the old circuits. It'll take them weeks to fix it, if it's ever sold to someone who cares. Our moment of glory never arrived. It would have been righteous. I think it would have made us famous. Maybe God was looking after his number one guy after all. As long as it took us to get our gear into the building, it felt like a whole lot longer getting it out.

Thirty-two million euro that visit cost. Thirty-two million euro going past empty shells, while ten thousand people have nowhere to call their own. There is room for all these people to live. Above shops, behind offices, in buildings that are being turned into luxury hotels. Dublin has the money, but clearly not the political will.

*God Save the Pope* will never see the light of day. It exists somewhere, and I'm sure one of us could dig it out if we went looking for it, but the band kind of fell apart after that.

William moved back in with his parents, and Gordon joined another band. I haven't written music since.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This story was inspired by the pope's visit to Ireland in 2018. I wanted to do what the lads in the story tried to do myself, but being in Limerick, and not in a band, I didn't have the ways or means to achieve it. I decided to incorporate the idea into a story instead.*

*Ireland is in the middle of a housing crisis. Rents are skyrocketing, as are the price of homes, but the government parties are ideologically opposed to building social housing. I wanted this (cramped conditions, room sharing, dereliction, etc), to be in the background of the events of the story, because it's in the background of everything that's been going on in Ireland for most of the last decade.*

*The pope's visit to Ireland also came shortly after our referendum on the 8th Amendment, where Ireland voted (with a 2/3 majority) to repeal the constitutional ban on abortion services. There was an assumption that Ireland was still a deeply Catholic, conservative country, but the historic vote to repeal, the sparse attendance of the popes visit, and the later, uncontroversial legalization of blasphemy (thanks be to fucking god) shows how far we've come - although we still have a long way to go.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** Kevin O'Connor is a writer, comedian and brewer from Limerick City in Ireland. He holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Limerick. His stories

have appeared in *The Ghastling* and *The Ogham Stone*. He is currently working on his first novel.