

# First person

## I'm a Catholic ... magician

*Angelo Stagnaro uses magic to teach the faith, expose occultists – and teleport people on live TV. Simon Caldwell meets the showman also known as 'Erasmus'*

The televised final of *Myanmar's Got Talent* last year featured a mesmerising performance by Erasmus – the stage name of the American magician Angelo Stagnaro.

Erasmus began his act by randomly selecting a volunteer: he did this by throwing 10 paper aeroplanes into the audience, one of which contained a message to come to the stage.

The recipient, a boy, was hypnotised by Stagnaro and handed a mobile phone belonging to one of the show's judges, together with a list of grocery items selected there and then by the four judges. Then he was told to go into a large covered box.

On live TV, the boy was then “teleported” to another city in Myanmar where he was picked up on CCTV, and the location of the phone was logged by satellite.

When the boy returned with the correct groceries the receipt showed the time and location of the errand – in the other city.

People are still wondering how Stagnaro performed the trick. Of course, he won't – and, under professional oaths, should not – tell, though he dismisses the theory he used identical twins.

“I had to get permission from three magic societies in America to do that trick on television,” says Stagnaro. “I am now the only person in the world to teleport a live human being on live TV. David Copperfield does it all the time, but he records the shows.”

Besides working as a magician, Stagnaro is also a master of mentalism, a craft of discerning barely perceptible truths about a person from the tiniest of clues. Whereas a magician uses props such as a deck of cards, the mentalist uses intuition or just a handshake to read volumes into an individual's personality and immediate past.

He is so convincing that he starts and ends each act with a disclaimer along the lines of, “I am not a psychic, I don't believe psychic abilities exist ... but I am really, really good at fooling you into thinking they exist.” Not that it makes much difference; invariably he is approached afterwards by people pleading



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with him to “read their cards” or suchlike.

Stagnaro never agrees to such requests. As a man who describes himself on Facebook as “very, very Catholic”, he not only abides by proscriptions in the Catechism against the use of divination and sorcery, but is also actively involved in exposing the fake spiritualists, psychics and others

*‘I do not believe psychic abilities exist, but I am really, really good at fooling you’*

who use magic tricks and occult practices for their own gain, usually pecuniary.

Stagnaro whispers behind his hand that “there is no such thing as magic”. He instead defines a magician as an actor who fools people into thinking he is a magician. He uses his craft to do good, believing that being a magician can be a religious vocation.

St John Bosco, he points out, is not only the patron of magicians but was so accomplished in his field that he devised the “beheading illusion”, whereby he could make his head appear to fall from

his shoulders before replacing it. The trick is still practised today by a minority of skilled magicians.

St John used magic tricks principally as a means of teaching children about the faith, an example which Stagnaro has emulated, not least through his 2009 book *The Catechist's Magic Kit: 80 Simple Tricks for Teaching Catholicism to Kids*. The book is great fun both to read and use, giving step-by-step illustrated guides to explain, for example, the Resurrection by tearing up a playing card before restoring it in full.

“I think that if every young man is honest with himself, we are attracted to two things: magic and dinosaurs,” he says. “To me, it led to a degree in archaeology – I'm living the life.”

Pretty much everyone, Stagnaro believes, enjoys a good magic trick. “They like to relieve themselves of reality for just a moment, for just a few seconds, and think: ‘Did that rabbit actually come out of that hat? Did he actually produce \$1,000 from my one dollar?’”

“Some adults are puzzled, some are truly interested and some are embarrassed, but children have this incredible reaction. It's universal, and I love that reaction.”

Stagnaro is something of a scholar who has written books about the Catholic faith, all of which have been granted *nihil obstat* and imprimaturs by New York bishops. He was even successful in obtaining an imprimatur for a cookbook for Lent, leading one bishop to joke that his next work might be about Catholicism and indoor plumbing.

Unable to perform live during lockdown, he has spent much of 2020 writing an extensive study of “the life of the mind”, which he has balanced with the corporal works of mercy in serving the poor of New York as a Franciscan tertiary.

The demand for magic acts has remained, however, leading him to perform via social media for groups such as Opus Dei. “Who is the sourpuss who doesn't like magic?” he asks. “I think I have only met five in my life.”