

Email Correspondence between Ascension and Fabiola Garza October 4 - November 15, 2022

Emails originally shared publicly by Fabiola Garza on Facebook on November 17, 2022.
Most recent email listed at the top.

To: Jonathan, Jennifer
From: Fabiola Garza Villalobos
Subject: Re: Response Requested: Catholic Princess Saints
Date: Tue, Nov 15, 2:55 AM

Hi Jonathan,

I deeply appreciate your response. I would very much appreciate a pause in marketing of your book Catholic Princess Saints for a three month period coinciding with the release of my book. The particulars can be discussed with WOF.

My art was clearly shown to you artist. "While it seems common with the art style" is a weak excuse and one that would be confirmed if we contacted Joan Grace. For both our sakes however, I think it's best to settle the matter as best we can here. So please, yes change the vignettes and series title in your next reprinting. There will most likely be issues in the public spheres regarding the similarities and its origins, but I assume you've taken that into account.

The issue is not compensation, as I stated in the letter, I was a pitching a project, not working for Ascension. It is an ethical and moral matter at the very least. It is a large oversight, a project that should never have been made or published in its current form. However, the suggestions you have made regarding the title and vignette change are appropriate and good start to repairing our relationship as I decide on next steps.

Sincerely,
Fabiola Garza

To: Fabiola Garza Villalobos
Cc: Jennifer
From: Jonathan
Subject: Re: Response Requested: Catholic Princess Saints
Date: Oct 13, 2022, 12:32 PM

Hi Fabiola,

Thank you for sharing your experience and bringing these issues to our attention. Jen and I had a chance to look into this and appreciate you sharing the hurt you've experienced and regret how it's impacted your trust in Ascension.

If you would like, I would be happy to meet with you on a video call to hear more about your experience and anything else you'd like to share. I also wanted to make sure you got a response to your message so you know how we would like to address your concerns.

We were interested in pursuing the concept of princess saints seeing the offerings of other publishers and hearing you speak about it so passionately on a podcast.

While it is not unusual for us to explore a project in a few conversations, it is unusual for those conversations to last as long as they did in this situation. We are looking at this as an opportunity to improve our processes by conducting a retrospective analysis to identify procedures we can put in place to clarify expectations at the inception of projects.

You asked about a pause on marketing our book on the release of the book with Word on Fire. In respect to you and to avoid confusion in the market we can offer to pause our marketing for the series for a three month period coinciding with the release of your book on or around Easter of 2024.

You also asked us to consider anything else given the circumstances and gave an example of the similarities of the vignette. While it seems common with the art style, again out of respect for you and to avoid confusion in the market, we will change the vignettes and series title in our next reprinting. We believe a series title such as "Catholic Saint Stories" with a subtitle of "The Princesses of Scotland, France, and Poland", will allow both our projects the space to be successful.

As you mentioned you were not compensated during the time in which we were exploring the project with you, we would be open to compensating you for that time. Let me know if this is something that you'd be interested in.

We can memorialize this in an agreement with you if you'd like. Again, we appreciate your bringing this to our attention and working with us to come to the best outcome given the circumstances.

Thanks,
Jon

To: Fabiola Garza Villalobos
Cc: Jonathan
From: Jennifer
Subject: Re: Response Requested: Catholic Princess Saints
Date: Mon, Oct 10, 2:17 PM

Good afternoon Fabiola,

I apologize for the delay in responding to your email. I was out sick all last week just returning back to the office today. I wanted to acknowledge receipt of your email and that this will take me a few days to gather some information on how best to handle your request. We will have a response to you by this Friday.

Sincerely,
Jennifer

To: Jennifer, Jonathan
From: Fabiola Garza Villalobos
Subject: Response Requested: Catholic Princess Saints
Date: Tue, Oct 4, 9:29 PM

Leadership of Ascension Press,

For those of you who do not know me, my name is Fabiola Garza. I am a devout Catholic, a published author, and a Disney illustrator. In October 2019, an employee of Ascension, Andrew Lanchoney, contacted me because he had heard about the Princess Saints book I wanted to publish. For about eight months, I worked under a mutual nondisclosure agreement with Ascension to develop my series. Unfortunately, a number of issues I outline below led me, amicably, to decide not to publish Princess Saints with Ascension. Subsequently, I signed a contract with Word on Fire to develop my book and subsequent series, which is scheduled to launch Easter 2024.

A few weeks ago a Catholic speaker privately contacted me and sent me the link to Ascension's new book Catholic Princess Saint Stories, saying they were confused because they thought I was doing the book.

I was gutted. I felt betrayed and bewildered. When I decided to not sign with Ascension Joanne McHugh wrote, "I know how important this project is to you, and as its mother, I understand that you want to protect and nurture your book "baby."" I made it completely clear to her that I was going to further develop my project and fully intended to bring it to completion. I was never once contacted by Ascension to say that they were going to move forward with a "Princess Saints" book, using an almost identical title, an illustration style I chose and illustrated for the book, along with the first idea I pitched but later diverted from during the course of my contact with Ascension.

My goal in this letter is to explain what happened from my perspective, explain the negative impact this has had on me (and will have on Word of Fire), and propose a few modest solutions that would be just under the circumstances and help repair our relationship.

The Inception of The Princess Saints

I've been a long time lover of fairytales and have always wanted to expound the reality that God is our Happily Ever After, and after working so long at Disney, I wanted to combine two of the things I love most: Jesus and Princesses. I had a unique perspective, and I wanted Princess Saints to not just be a book but my ministry. I wanted each little girl to know she was a Princess because Jesus was King, and she did not need to spend her life proving her worth. At the outset, I thought a book with royal Catholic female saints would be perfect.

On January 14, I gave an interview on Leah Darrow's podcast where I stated, "I have this idea that I really hope comes to fruition...I want to do a series, like a book that basically is a compilation of royal Catholic Saints who were part of a Royal family or something because I really want young girls to enjoy all the princess things but also see that the best way to be a princess is to serve Christ so I think just a really fun book full of Catholic Princesses would be really great because it would just up the ante of what it means to be a princess."

Proceedings with Ascension

On October 7, 2019, Andrew Lanchoney, an Associate Product Manager for Ascension, emailed me and said "One of my colleagues was listening to an interview you did on Leah Darrow's podcast in which you mentioned an idea that we think would be amazing: a book or series about Catholic princess saints!"

I was very excited about the idea, as I had a very specific vision for it. I brought my ideas forward to Andrew and his colleagues; and specified that I wanted to include St. Jadwiga (St. Hedwig of Poland) and St. Elizabeth of Hungary. Joanne McHugh was attached to the email notes of our meeting and had full knowledge that these were my ideas. The timeline Andrew was asking for was too tight given that I worked full time so I did not continue my conversations with Ascension for a while.

Joanne McHugh wrote and called me sometime later hoping I would reconsider and still publish Princess Saints with Ascension. I signed a mutual nondisclosure agreement on April 22, 2020, and we began to move forward.

For about eight months, I worked in good faith under the NDA to give the Ascension team what they needed to move forward with my project. My goal was clear: that Ascension would publish my Catholic Princess Saints book. To that end, I provided them with numerous drawings, compilations of research including specific saints I identified to be in the book, text, insight into my creative vision for the book, and more. Naturally, I wanted to understand the terms of my deal with Ascension, agree on a production schedule that worked for me and my other commitments, and maintain the greatest degree of creative control possible. I changed the angle of what I hoped would be volume I, to include non-royal Catholic Saints as well.

But my interactions with Ascension were confusing, and my attempts to get greater clarity or reassurances failed. On one hand, Ascension acted like a publisher asking me to pitch a book. For example, Ascension reached out to me about publishing my book, and Joanne was clear that she could give me no information about a book contract, possible compensation, or anything else until I completed a sample chapter. On the other hand, Ascension sometimes sent me the mixed-message that they only wanted to use me as an illustrator. Although Ascension acted like I was pitching them my book, they provided a huge amount of feedback, including to my entire style of writing and the format of the book,

and they demanded that my sample chapter be more complete and conform to the specifications they wanted. I began to feel sidelined, but in good faith I tried to be flexible. In retrospect, I would have preferred that Ascension simply said they didn't want to publish my book, so I could have sought an alternative publisher. Instead, they continued to demand greater degrees of creative control, still without any clarity of my role in the book, the timing, and how I would be compensated.

On October 7, 2020, after about seven months of uncompensated work, I asked Joanne in an email for some details on contract and compensation before I continued to work. On October 8, she responded that we hadn't got to the contract stage because we didn't yet have a complete sample chapter (meaning, the sample chapter Joanne wanted), and until that, "we can't talk turkey." She told me that she was contemplating bringing in another author entirely, who I would have no ability to vet, interview, or apparently control in any way.

October 16, I asked her to "please halt on developing anything with an author" because I wanted details settled in a contract. I stated I wanted rights to the title, characters, royalties, and right to approve the final product. I stated I would do the research and reasserted my desire to be the co-author. Finally, on October 20, 2020, I told her I "decided not to move my project forward with Ascension Press." I explained that the work was more than just a project to be met on a deadline, but instead a vision of the way I am called to evangelize. I thanked Joanne for her time and stated I was "forever grateful" for the time she spent on the project.

And I stated at the beginning of the letter Joanne responded, "I know how important this project is to you, and as its mother, I understand that you want to protect and nurture your book 'baby.'"

Subsequently, I took my project to Word on Fire. Word on Fire immediately gave me a book advance and book contract that gives me creative control over my project. Its projected publication date is Easter 2024. I was disappointed things didn't work out with Ascension, but felt we parted respectfully. I never dreamed they would move forward and publish a book so similar to the one I had pitched to them under the NDA.

Ascension's Catholic Princess Saints Book and Its Impact on Me

The day I learned that Ascension was publishing Catholic Princess Saint Stories, I was putting finishing touches on my Princess Saints logo. I was blindsided and heartbroken. The Ascension team had not bothered finding a different title. Holy Royals? Daughters of the King? Princesses of Faith? I could think of a dozen in a minute. Not even a different artistic style. And there were St. Hedwig of Poland and St. Elizabeth of Hungary. My own friend had contacted me thinking for a moment it was mine. Now I had to think of a different title, potentially hire a lawyer and rethink my project.

When this happened, I sought the counsel of a few Catholic creatives, and I was very surprised to learn that—at least in the eyes of those I spoke to—Ascension has a reputation for not respecting creatives. Whether those rumors have an accurate basis or not, my experience makes me feel they are true. And it saddened me deeply because Ascension has nourished my faith for a very long time. And I truly believed the company was above just doing what was legal over doing what was right.

This has been a painful process for me. My greatest gift is my creativity, and my projects are like little pieces of my soul. Actually, Joanne put it best when she called the Catholic Princess Saints book my book "baby." Many creatives I know feel the same way about their work, which is why we are so sensitive, careful, and painstaking about what we create. Because of that, Ascension's goal to rush the production schedule of the book to meet the Christmas buying season felt off-putting to me, and the revelations they

were talking to other authors without even consulting me really stung, which is why I felt Ascension wasn't a good fit. But I did think Ascension was honorable, so when I saw Catholic Princess Saint Stories, I felt gullible and naïve. I talked with other Catholic editors, and they said they could not imagine doing this to someone.

In today's environment, Catholic publishers really matter. And I believe one of their most important roles is to produce beautiful art that impacts and changes culture. To do that, it's really important that creatives can trust Catholic publishers, which means being able to float and develop their ideas without fear the publisher will just move forward anyway.

How To Move Forward

I have been consulting with a lawyer, and my earnest desire is to deal with this matter outside the civil process if possible. What I desire most is for you to genuinely reflect on this process and how it has wounded me, minimize the damage to me and Word on Fire, and prevent this from happening to another creative. To that end, and with the goal of avoiding litigation that would surely be painful, I respectfully ask for a written response to my letter within 7 days, which includes:

- Indications that you have genuinely reflected on this matter, made efforts to see my point of view, and had appropriate conversations;
- An outline of your action plan to insure this does not happen to another creative who trusts you (to include, for example, greater transparency about your publishing goals at the outset; company trainings; etc);
- Your agreement, in writing, that in the three months before and after release of my book with Word on Fire, you pause actively advertising Ascension's Catholic Princess Saints book and publish no more volumes of that series.
- Anything else you think just under the circumstances.

Although I have been advised I have a claim against you under civil law for violation of our mutual nondisclosure agreement, I am not asking for you to halt production of the book at this time. Regardless of how you have treated me, I do not wish to magnify the problems caused by this episode for any party. That said, I reserve the right to ask you to halt production and for my full and complete rights under the mutual nondisclosure agreement and other applicable laws should you choose not to meet my modest requests.

Once the WOF edition comes out, it's likely some people will wonder about the similar book series, whether I or WOF copied Ascension's idea. In that case, I will feel obligated to share the facts and timeline detailed in this letter publicly to clarify the situation and confirm that neither I nor WOF copied from Ascension. I hope that the information I've given is a surprise to you and that you are unaware of what transpired.

For years, I have felt that using my talents to tell the stories of the Catholic Princess Saints in my own creative style is one of my most important callings and ministries. I hope you understand that I am coming to you to stand up for myself and my work and also to propose a way of repairing our relationship. I genuinely and prayerfully hope for a resolution to this conflict, so that we can heal this relationship and resume our work producing beautiful, life-giving content in the service of Christ and his Church.

Respectfully,
Fabiola Garza