

# THE CRIMINAL HISTORY OF THE PAPACY

**Many of the popes  
of the 13th to 16th  
centuries continued  
the criminal,  
bloodthirsty and  
debauched lifestyles  
of their corrupt  
predecessors and  
reached new depths  
of depravity that  
the modern Church  
is keen to keep  
hidden.**

## **Part 2 of 3**

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**W**e are still in the late 12th and early 13th centuries and now expand upon the life of Pope Innocent III (1198–1216), whom many Catholics exalt above all others and regard as one of the chief constructive forces in the development of European civilisation. When he was elected in 1198, he demanded an oath of allegiance to himself, as pope, from the prefect, who represented the Holy Roman Emperor, and the senators, who represented the Roman people. In that same year, he suppressed all records of earlier Church history by establishing the Secret Archives (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, xv, p. 287). The Church admits: "Unfortunately, only few of the records [of the Church] prior to the year 1198 have been released" (*Encyclopaedia Biblica*, Adam & Charles Black, London, 1899). This admission reveals that around twelve hundred years of Christian history are hidden in the Vatican vaults and therefore publicly unknown.

In order to curb the nobles, Innocent gave great power and wealth to his brother, but this nepotism and his despotic conduct aroused increasing anger and in 1203 the Romans flew to arms once more and drove Innocent and his brother into the country. He at length returned to Rome and heavily fortified the old Papal Palace. He proceeded with all the ruthlessness which is characteristic of "great popes", and he was indifferent to the appalling bloodshed which he caused. At the Fourth Lateran Council in April 1215, Innocent III condemned the Magna Carta and demanded that the Jews wear distinctive dress. He also declared that anybody caught reading the Bible would be stoned to death by "soldiers of the Church militia" (Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, 1759). But the main purpose of his Council was to develop a plan to expand his military affairs, his intention being ultimately to dominate all Europe—a Weltherrschaft, in which he intended to subject all kings and princes to the judgement of the Holy See.

Dominic's "Catholic army" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, v, p. 107) was engaged in the annihilation of the Cathars in southern France, and Innocent needed an additional army for an intervention in Germany.

He asked his military adviser, Bishop Grosseteste (d. 1227), one of the most judicious prelates of the age, where he could obtain more papal troops, the advice being: "from the Catholic population, the followers of Christ, a body always incorporate with the Devil" (Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, op. cit.; expanded upon in *From St Francis to Dante*, G. G. Coulton, David Nutt, London, 1908 ed., p. 56). From centuries of Christian history as recorded by the Church itself, it is a simple matter to gather together some fascinating clerical pronouncements, and this is one example of what the papal hierarchy thought about its followers of the time.

The pope's intrusion into Germany and, later, Constantinople ended in disaster, and his only success was against the unarmed Cathars. "It is no doubt for this reason that historians have denied to him the title of 'the Great', which he would otherwise seem to have deserved" (*The Popes: A Concise Biographical History*, Burns & Oates, Publishers to the Holy See, London, 1964, p. 226; imprimatur, Georgius L. Craven). At the age of fifty-five, Innocent was "killed by the sword in the interests of the crusade [against the Moors] which had been decided upon at the Lateran Council" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, viii, p. 16).

The words of Pope Gregory IX (1227–41; Ugolini di Conti, 1143–1241) confirm the Church's suppressive attitude towards unorthodoxy, for he commanded his clergy to instruct "the layman, when he hears any speak ill of the Christian faith, to defend it not with words but with the sword, which he should thrust into the other's belly as far as it

will go" (*Chronicles of the Crusades*, G. de Villehardouin, p. 148). The Romans were so offended with Pope Gregory's malice that he was expelled from the city three times in seven years, and his death, greeted by wild rejoicing, let loose throughout Christendom a flood of disdainful epithets and stories about him.

In 1243, Sinisbaldo Fieschi (c. 1207–1254), a native of Genoa, assumed the papal chair and the slaughters continued unabated. He called himself Innocent IV (1243–54) and "he surpassed all his predecessors in the ferocity and unscrupulousness of his attacks" (*The Chronicle of Richard of San Germano*, xii, p. 507). After the completion of the annihilation of the Cathars, he turned the military attention of the Church onto the family of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II (1194–1250).

Frederick was fondly known as "the Wonder of the World" and he was the last great ruler of the Hohenstaufen dynasty. His family opposed the Catholic army, and Frederick and later his son Conrad spent their lives locked in fierce battles with papal troops.

Frederick complained that the pope, whom he called "a dragon of a poisonous race", aspired to be the feudal monarch of the whole of Europe, and Frederick fought against the attempted papal takeover of his vast estates.

Here is Church confirmation of its ongoing butchery, cited from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

"Pope Alexander IV (1254–61) ... was easily led astray by the whisperings of flatterers, and inclined to listen to the wicked suggestions of avaricious persons ... he continued Innocent IV's policy of a war of extermination against the progeny of Frederick II ... and the people rose against the Holy See ... the unity of Christendom was a thing of the past."

(*Catholic Encyclopedia*, i, pp. 287–288)

As for "unity", it is a relative term, for within Christianity it never existed, nor does it exist to this day. The people of the city of Rome supported the cause of Frederick's family and turned out in arms, and once more a pope hastily retreated to the provinces.

The story of the next four popes is almost entirely the record of the struggle with Frederick's family—a struggle which at some stages was so unjust, so patently inspired by sheer hatred and greed, that it disgusted Christendom and disgusts every non-Catholic historian today.

Then, recorded in Church documents, is one of the strangest pontificates in papal history:

"Ten days after the death of Nicholas IV (1292), the twelve cardinals assembled in Rome but two years and three months were to pass before they gave the Church a pope."

(*The Popes: A Concise Biographical History*, op. cit., p. 19)

The history of these peculiar elections (now called conclaves) is sodden with corruption and is one of the most amazing volumes in historical religious literature yet to be fully revealed. However, in 1294, and for some obscure reason, the weary cardinals agreed to make Pietro di Morrone (1215–1296) the new pope, called Celestine V. Before and during the time of his pontificate, he

lived a hermit's life in a cave in the wild mountains of Abruzzi, south of Rome, a fact that has proved difficult for the modern-day Church to dismiss.

With Celestine, we see another of the Church's confessions of the ignorance and uncritical simplicity of the papal office, extending over fifteen hundred years of Christian history. The cardinals were disquieted when the humble monk ordered them to come to his cave, but they went and there they consecrated him as pope.

In one of our main reference sources, *The Popes: A Concise Biographical History*, Celestine is described

as a man of "limited learning and completely lacking in experience of the world" (p. 238).

However, in the pope's absence, the powerful machinery of the Church Militant flourished under the management of the warrior-cardinal of Ostia, Latino Malabranca, a man with extensive military experience (*Diderot's Encyclopédie*).

King Charles II of Naples, wanting papal favours, sent a deputation to the cave to escort the pope to Naples to meet him. Celestine arrived and created a daily public spectacle of conceding extraordinary and unlimited privileges to Charles. The cardinals, now realising that the pope was "of disastrous simplicity", were moved to demand his resignation (*The Papacy*, George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd, London, 1964, p. 87).

Chief among those who pressed him to abdicate was Benedetto Gaetani (or Caetani) (1234–1303), a rich and robust prelate of great ambition. It was widely believed that Gaetani had a speaking tube put through the walls of the pope's room, and a "voice from heaven" bade him resign. Celestine V was convinced that "God had spoken to him" and he abdicated.

Then, in February 1296, Gaetani purchased the papacy from the cardinals for 7,000 gold florins and became Pope Boniface VIII (1294–1303). Celestine was immediately imprisoned in a grim castle and was so brutally treated that he soon died.



Pope Innocent III wrote a revealing work called *Registro*, in which he deals extensively with the power of the Church to punish sins and sinners. Within it, he included this vivid illustration which shows a wolf in friar's clothing with a pronged weapon demanding alms from a cloven-footed creature with a curled tail. This doe-eyed composite animal satirically represents believers in Jesus Christ whom the general populace called "pigs with crosses".

(From Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*; © Archivio Segreto, Vatican)

## A traitor to the faith

In enriching his own family, the Gaetani—especially Pietro, a son of very doubtful character—Boniface VIII entered into a bitter quarrel with the Colonna, a powerful family responsible for constantly driving the popes from Rome. When Stephen Cardinal Colonna, the brother of James Cardinal Colonna, seized a cargo of the pope's gold and silver destined for the Gaetani family, Boniface VIII excommunicated the entire Colonna family and declared a crusade against it. The family replied with a manifesto in which it accused Boniface VIII of acquiring the papacy by fraud and appealed against him to the judgement of a General Council. Under the leadership of one of his cardinals, Boniface's army destroyed the property of the Colonna and scattered the family members all over Europe.

In some chronicles, Boniface VIII is accused of intimacy with a French countess. We cannot confirm this, but against the Catholic report of his learning and goodness we put the undisputed fact that his nepotism and simony were scandalous. So were his papal bulls, which were designed to assert the absolute supremacy of his authority. Early in his seven-year papacy, in 1296 Boniface issued the first of two of the most famous bulls in Christian history. Its tone recalled the papal thunderbolts of Gregory VII (1073–85), and its opening words, *Clericis laicos*, gave it a name. Its first sentence made a truthful admission and reveals the moral ugliness within Christianity: "Antiquity reports that laymen are exceedingly hostile to the papacy, and our experience certainly shows this to be true at present." Distaste for the popes probably reflected a secret doubt as to their claim of a divine origin to their religion. This bull was aimed particularly at the king of France, Philip IV, the grandson of St Louis, but failed to achieve its purpose. Then, on 18 November 1302, Boniface VIII issued his iniquitous "Bull of Two Swords" (*Unam Sanctam*, "The One Holy"), which formalised the framework of Christianity's core structure for centuries to come. The pope's bulletin declared that the Church controlled "two swords", that is, two powers:

"Both swords are in the power of the Church, the spiritual and the temporal; the spiritual is wielded in the Church by the hand of the clergy; the secular is exerted for the Church by the hand of its military...and the spiritual power has the right to establish and guide the secular power, and also to judge it when it does not act rightly... Consequently, whoever opposes the two swords of the Church opposes the law of God."

(Bull *Unam Sanctam*, Boniface VIII, 18 November 1302; overview in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, xv, p. 126)

The Church under Boniface VIII became a worldly ruler and seized vast territories that it called the "States of the Church". It wasn't until 1870 that Italian patriot bayonets finally recovered the stolen regions and restored them to a united Italy. At that time the Italians, under Victor Emmanuel II, king of Sardinia and Piedmont, took back Rome and the adjacent papal territories and

declared the Eternal City the capital of the newly formed United Kingdom of Italy. The Papal States, with 15,774 square miles and three million taxpaying inhabitants, were thus removed from the Vatican's investment portfolio and vanished forever from the map of Europe—and from history. The Church, with the exception of 108 acres of the Vatican City, no longer had any ill-gained Earthly European dominion to rule and its temporal sovereignty came to an end.

But the story of Boniface VIII is not yet over. The article on him in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* runs to nine pages, and these are nine pages of uselessness with admissions of character faults but desperate evasions of serious charges. However, early editions of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* reveal the truth about this pope, and the entry about him is written by Professor Rockwell, a distinguished ecclesiastical historian. He

explains the hostility towards the pope by saying: "Avarice, lofty claims and frequent exhibitions of arrogance made him many foes ... he was believed by many to be in league with the Devil" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 3rd ed., 1797).

It's interesting to note that after the publication of the 11th edition in 1898, the Catholic Church purchased *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and in a few short years new editions devoid of "offending" material superseded earlier versions that had now been ordered destroyed (*History in the Encyclopedia*, D. H. Gordon and N. L.

Torrey, New York, 1947); also, *The Good News of the Kingdoms*, Norman Segal, Australia, 1995). In due course, in 1943, *Encyclopedia Britannica* was assigned to the Roman Catholic University in Chicago (*Encyclopedias: Their History Throughout the Ages*, 1966, two editions; the second edition pays particular attention to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). In subsequent decades, Church missionaries went door to door the world over selling the sanitised *Encyclopaedia Britannica* into millions of unsuspecting households. Persons in

a position to compare earlier editions with "under Church management" editions should do so for personal confirmation that a new and fictitious Christian history was written and published, omitting the previous damaging information. Negative comments about Boniface VIII were some that were deleted and other sentences modified, but Professor Rockwell's name was retained.

*The Cambridge Mediaeval History* (eds Gwatkin and Whitney, The Macmillan Co., 1911–13, vol. vii, p. 5), which records the general sentiment or judgement of modern historians, says that "the evidence seems conclusive that he [Boniface VIII] was doctrinally a sceptic and concealed under the mitre the spirit of mockery". King Philip IV of France, supported by civilian lawyers concerned to exalt his authority against that of the pope, opposed the Bull *Unam Sanctam* of Boniface VIII. He summoned his Parliament in Paris and laid before it an impeachment of the pope for heresy, simony and rapacity. Boniface was specifically accused of "...wizardry, dealing with the Devil, disbelief in Jesus Christ, declaring that sins of the flesh were not sins, and causing the murder of Pope Celestine and

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others. He had a certain 'idol' in which a 'diabolical spirit' was enclosed whom he was in the habit of consulting ... a strange voice answered him" (*A History of the Popes*, Dr Joseph McCabe, C. A. Watts & Co, London, 1939).

In 1303, Pope Boniface VIII was seized at Anagni, to where he had fled, and was delivered to Paris to be tried. Sciarra Colonna and his embittered family were at the French court and a General Council was convened at the University of Paris. Before five archbishops, 22 bishops, many monks and friars, Boniface VIII jeered habitually at religion and morals, and made this remarkable statement:

"There was no Jesus Christ and the Eucharist is just flour and water. Mary was no more a virgin than my own mother, and there is no more harm in adultery than in rubbing your hands together."

(*A History of the Popes*, McCabe, ibid.)

He was transferred back to Rome with a strong escort provided by the Orsini family, who feared papal troops would attempt to free him. He was in so tempestuous a rage that respectable chroniclers of the time say that he went insane and committed suicide. That is improbable, but he died in prison a month later in October 1303, probably of poisoning or strangulation, not of "the shock of the brutal assault on him" as the Church opines (*The Popes: A Concise Biographical History*, op. cit., p. 239). His enemies spread abroad a report that, in his last moments, he had confessed his league with the demon and died with flames issuing from his mouth.

### Popes banished from Rome

The havoc and scandal leading to and resulting from the internal and external papal wars, the blood, terror and viciousness, and the unspeakably debased social conditions which made it all possible in the name of Christ can be but faintly imagined.

The unpopularity of the popes was such that over the centuries many of them were murdered or driven from Rome by mobs or imperial enemies. For a total period exceeding 240 years between 1119 and 1445, popes were regularly and forcibly evicted from Rome, reigning variously in Avignon, Anagni, Orvieto, Viterbo, Siena, Florence, Pisa and Perugia.

As early as 1119, for example, the locals revolted against Pope Gelasius II (1118–19), who fled to Gaeta in southern Italy by rowing down the River Tiber in a dinghy. As he escaped, the angry crowd ran along the river's edge, hurling stones, arrows and foul abuse at the rapidly disappearing pope.

Similarly, Pope Gregory VIII (1187) was so hated for his crime of blinding his opponents (as was Pope Adrian III, 884–85) that the locals tied him backwards on a camel and paraded him through the streets of Rome, screaming vulgarities at him and pelting him with rocks until he was dead (Diderot's *Encyclopédie*).

To avoid impending charges of murder, Pope Calixtus II (1119–24) desecrated the alleged tomb of St Peter and fled to Constantinople with "silver panels from the doors", "thick plates of gold" that had covered the altars and "a solid gold statue" (*A History of the Popes*, McCabe, op. cit.).

The last recorded pope to be evicted from Rome was Eugenius IV (1431–47), who spent most of his nine-year exile living in the brothels of Naples (Diderot's *Encyclopédie*).

In 1309, under the papacy of Clement V (1305–14; Bertrand de Got, 1264–1314), the Romans expressed so much displeasure at papal criminality that the whole Christian bureaucracy was physically evicted from Rome to the city of Avignon in southern France. It was there that the popes resided permanently for seven decades until 1377, in palaces built behind stone fortifications,

where they created a complicated bureaucratic administration. In Jewish circles the expulsion was called "the Babylonian captivity of the popes", and the mounting resentment against the papacy that flooded Europe was justified.

Famous Italian scholar and statesman Francesco Petrarch (1304–74) lived for years on the outskirts of Avignon and compiled a mass of detail about the papal lifestyle that fell under his observation. He left one of the most amazing pictures of Church sordidness that is to be found in any literature available on the Christian religion. He was the greatest intellectual writer of his age, and powerful sovereigns of the day competed for his presence at imperial courts. In his book *Letters without a Title*, Petrarch described the papal court at Avignon as "boiling,

seething, obscene, terrible...a fountain of dolour where Jesus Christ is mocked, where sesterce [money] is adored, where honesty is called foolishness and cunning called wisdom...all this you may see heaped up there" (Letter Var. VII). He said that Avignon surpassed in vice any city of antiquity, and no one knew mediaeval life and literature better than Petrarch. He gives details of the obscene gaiety of life in the papal court that "ragged like a moral pestilence...a school of falsity, and a temple of heresy" (Letter Misc. XVIII).

A friend of the Colonnas, Petrarch was invited to address the Senate in Rome, and on Easter Sunday 1341 he arrived in the capitol clad in the robes of his friend and admirer, King Robert of Naples. There he delivered a powerful indictment against the Avignon popes and their cardinals, saying, in summary, that they were "...swept along in a flood of the most obscene pleasure, an incredible storm of debauch, the most horrible and unprecedented shipwreck of chastity. The attachment of the popes to Avignon is due to the fact that they have built there, as it were, a paradise of pleasure, a celestial habitation in which they dwell without a god as if they were to continue to dwell there forever" (Letter VIII).



The battlements in the background are the remains of the fortress Palace of the Popes at Avignon, built during the reigns of Benedict XII and Clement VI. It securely housed the papal court and administrative centre until 1377. The extravagances and the fiscal system of the papal court were severely criticised by mainstream Europe.

The sybaritic Pope Clement VI (Pierre Roger, 1291–1352; pope 1342–52) purchased Avignon from the queen of Naples and made his Palace of the Popes one of the most brilliant in Europe, a glamorous court where papal relatives and guests were constantly entertained with balls, banquets and tournaments. Petrarch's judgement of Clement was exceedingly severe. He had had both personal and epistolary relations with Clement, and Petrarch, a realist when he chose to be, described the pope thus:

"...foul with indulgences, bald, red-faced, with fat haunches, half-covered by his scanty gown...bent not so much by age as by hypocrisy. Impressive not by eloquence, but by a frowning silence, he traverses the halls of the whores, overthrowing the humble and trampling on justice."

(Petrarch, *Letters without a Title (Epistolae sine nomine)*, University Press, USA, 1969, Letter Misc. VII, p. 98)

Petrarch added that Clement VI occasionally rode around the city "...not in the midst of a marvelling crowd, but to insults and sneers ... he is the head of pompous processions, mounted on a white horse, feigning holiness. Before him goes his staff dressed in bright attire, making gestures to attract attention, trumpets sounding and banners fluttering in their hands." Petrarch speaks of the inordinate amount of time and effort Clement VI spent preparing for his parades, and "on his horse he was in constant fear lest the wind should disarrange his perfumed garb" (Letter Var. XV).

The "best" pope of the Avignon period, by Catholic standards, was Jacques Fournier (c. 1285–1342) who, at his coronation in the Dominican priory at Avignon on 8 January 1335, took the name Benedict XII (1334–42). There were, however, contemporaries such as Bishop Mollet, the learned Catholic historian of the Avignon popes, who regarded him as "a Nero, death to the laity, a viper to the clergy, a liar and a drunkard" (*A History of the Popes*, McCabe, op. cit., p. 115). Bishop Mollet admits that Benedict XII drank heavily, but according to the gospels so did Jesus Christ (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34). Some writers say that it was this pope who gave rise to the popular saying "drunk as a pope", and that his harshness and arrogance narrowly restricted what influence for good he had.

It was at Avignon that a series of forged documents was produced, today called the False Isidorian Decretals. In that fraud, popes and their associates compiled a series of fictitious letters, back-dated them to earlier centuries and wove them around a series of "official laws" that made the Church the absolute master of all Europe, Asia Minor and Egypt. Voltaire (1694–1778) termed the Isidorian Decretals "the boldest and most magnificent forgery that ever deceived the world". Then there were the remarkable and immense Pseudo-Areopagite Forgeries and the bitter persistence of the papacy in clinging to them after exposure. Since this is not a history of the Roman Church but of the popes, we will leave the subject of fake Catholic documents for another time.

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## France withdraws its support for Christianity

We now move forward a few decades with some remarkable information drawn from the *De schismate* of Dietrich von Nieheim (c. 1338–1418), a contemporary German lawyer of high character who was in the papal service for some decades. Dietrich witnessed the outrages he writes about, and he describes a pontificate that the Church admits was "one of the most disastrous in papal history" (*The Popes: A Concise Biographical History*, op. cit., p. 275). This was that of Bartolomeo Prignano (1318–1389), who became Pope Urban VI in 1378 and reigned until his death in 1389. Writing with strictly Christian sentiment, the Church said that he was "pious, but very vigorous" (ibid.).

Immediately upon his election, Urban VI hired a troop of fierce mercenary soldiers, who were then commonplace, and drove his rivals into the country. Before setting out to recover the papal possessions in the south, he sold the sacred vessels of the Roman churches which he had promised to his sons and daughters. He reaped a rich harvest by confiscating property from the wealthy nobles and creating saleable offices for an additional 37 bishops. Charles III, the king of Naples, was disgusted and sent an army to attack him, but Urban escaped over the rear wall of the Papal Palace. When he returned, the cardinals, who had discussed among themselves a plan to depose him, begged him to check his indecent displays of temper. However, Urban imprisoned six of them in the papal dungeons and had them tortured.

Dietrich von Nieheim was there, and he describes how the pope read his breviary in a loud voice to drown out their moans, while his son jeered at the victims. After a time, the pope escaped with his prisoners in chains and fled by sea to Genoa. Only one of the cardinals, Englishman Adam Easton, was ever heard of again, and few doubt that the pope had the others killed. Flitting from town to town, his son's vices causing him to be repeatedly expelled, Urban VI attempted to raise

money for a crusade against Naples but in 1389 died of poisoning, another thoroughly disreputable pope.

Pietro Tomacelli (1356–1404) then seized the papacy as the "kindly and tactful" Boniface IX (1389–1404) and whipped up the trade in sacred offices until the papal bureau looked like a stock exchange (*The Popes*, op. cit. p. 278). The pope's agents now sold not simply a vacant benefice but the "expectation" of one, so that staff watched the age and health of incumbents—and if, when an expectation was sold, another priest offered a larger sum for it, the pope declared that the first priest had cheated him and sold it to the second. Dietrich von Nieheim says that he saw the same benefice sold several times in one week, and that the pope talked business with his secretaries during Mass. The city cursed him and was in wild disorder.

In 1400, Boniface IX announced a jubilee, and pilgrims, mindful of the recent horrors of the Black Death and knowing that journeying was fraught with peril, made their way to Rome in the course of the year. Conditions in Rome itself were bad, and the pitifully impoverished inhabitants were making the most of their

opportunities to rape, murder and rob the pilgrims.

Boniface IX was succeeded in 1404 by the "gentle and virtuous" Innocent VII (Cosmo Migliorati, 1336–1406) (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, vii, 1910, p. 19). He maintained the 16-year-old scandal of the Western Schism created by the existence of multiple popes, and bitterly opposed his rivals. He enriched his relatives, who were so insufferable that Rome expelled them and the pope with the customary bloodshed.

In the meantime, the French cardinals had elected Benedict XIII (Pedro de Luna, 1328–1423) as a successor to Clement VII, but with the condition to fulfil, which he promised under oath, that he would make every effort to end the schism between him and his rival, Angelo Corraro (also Cortarrio or Corrarrio) (1336–1417), who became Pope Gregory XII in 1406. A schism, in the language of theology and canon law, is the rupture of ecclesiastical union and unity and, as pope, Benedict XIII refused to take a single step toward such unity. He took refuge in Avignon, and all France demanded his abdication. He then had to defend the Avignon palace against an attack by the French army, yet the greedy and vindictive Spaniard clung to his papal rags for more than 20 years while all Europe derided him. It was Pope Benedict XIII who took the extraordinary step of seeking out and destroying all copies of two second-century books that contained "the true name of Jesus Christ" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1797, "Jesus Christ" entry). He created four new cardinals specifically to single out for condemnation the secret Latin treatise called *Mar Yesu*, and then issued instructions for all copies of the mysterious Book of Elxai to be destroyed.

On 21 May 1408, King Charles VI of France (1368–1422) published a decree withdrawing the French Catholic Church and all French citizens from obedience to Pope Benedict XIII. He nullified his country's support for Christianity and declared France religiously neutral—a decision that was upheld until a Frenchman was elected pope years later.

At that time, Benedict XIII and Gregory XII were two legal but conflicting popes in a war of ambitions, and each believed that he alone should be the "only pope". Benedict XIII had earlier caused a scandal by his merciless taxation of the clergy of France and Spain, and a national Church Council voted against his unpopular decisions. It was now clear to all parties involved that in spite of his pre-election promise to resign as pope in the interests of the schism between his rival, he was determined to oust his opponent in Rome and maintain his position at all costs. While he and his troops were making their way to Rome, he learned by messenger of a legally elected third pope, Alexander V (1409–10). It is not known what Benedict XIII and Gregory XII thought of this development, but the Roman people greeted the news with dismay. Christianity now had three lawful popes, each with an army and each bitter rivals. Let the *Catholic Encyclopedia* bear clerical witness:

"The Great Schism (1378–1417) rent the Church. As cardinal

he [Alexander V] had sanctioned the agreement of the rival Colleges of Cardinals to join in a common effort for unity. He thus incurred the displeasure of Gregory XII, who tried to depose him. At the Council of Pisa (1409) he [Alexander V] preached the opening sermon, a scathing condemnation of his rival popes, and presided at the deliberations of the theologians who declared those popes heretics and schismatics ... in the rival Catholic world ... his legitimacy was questioned, and the Christian world was chagrined to find that instead of two popes it again had three."

(*Catholic Encyclopedia*, i, pp. 288-9)

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Alexander V died suddenly of suspected poisoning in 1410, and the Italian cardinals elected the Pisan Baldassare Cossa (c. 1370–1419) to replace him. He called himself Pope John XXIII (1410–1415) [not to be confused with Pope John XXIII, 1958–63; see next section], and to date he was the most corrupt man to have worn the tiara. The vices of Cardinal Cossa, who had bribed electors, were well known to the cardinals and all of Italy, and nothing could show more plainly than this election the depth to which the papacy had sunk. Whether he was the son of an Italian pirate, as Dietrich says, we need not stop to consider. For 15 years he had been the head of the popes' corrupt financial system and had led papal troops and mercenaries with all the ferocity and looseness of commanders of that age. Dietrich adds that, as papal legate at Bologna, Cossa had exacted a personal commission from gamblers and prostitutes. On these matters, it is enough to say that the cardinals who elected him were, like all Europeans, aware of his reputation, and we remain content with the official ecclesiastical description of his character.

#### **Prostitutes at a Church council**

After contemplating the disgusting spectacle of three greedy popes for four years, prelates and leading laymen of the Church persuaded Emperor Sigismund to convoke and preside at a Church General Council at Constance in 1414. It was an uncanny four-year event that defied understanding, and "the incontinence practised by the churchmen demoralised the city in which it was convened" (Samuel Edgar's *The Variations of Popery*, London, 1838, 2nd ed., p. 533). The priests employed 1,500 prostitutes, whom they called "vagrant strumpets" (*ibid.*), who refreshed them of an evening after their days of arguing in the Council. The sacerdotal fornicators, it seemed, were very liberal with their favours to the professional ladies. One courtesan, it is said, gained 800 florins, an immense sum in those days. She was treated very differently from John Huss (Jan Hus) and Jerome of Prague. The reverend debauchees enriched the prostitute and burned the reformers at the stake.

After hearing witnesses, the Council drew up a long indictment against John XXIII which ran to 54 Articles, and may be read in any collection of Church Council records available. He was later charged with rape, adultery, incest, sodomy and the murder of

Pope Alexander V. After a brief trial he was found guilty, deposed, imprisoned and strangled. The Romans pelted mud and stones at his coffin when it was brought to Rome. There was no public funeral. Gossip of the day had it that during his legation he seduced 200 women and a similar number of men. In modern times, in 1958, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli (1881–1963) assumed the papacy and for some reason adopted the same title as the first John XXIII. Vatican historians then set out to remove from its official records all references to the original John XXIII, but they were not completely successful, as papal lists then in publication were soon to come into the public domain.

After two years of wrangling, the cardinals elected Odo Colonna (1368–1431) as Pope Martin V (1417–31), and he and each of his successors made solemn oaths to reform the papacy and the Church, but in fact they sank deeper into the mire. The popes who had preceded Martin V had done so little for the betterment of the city of Rome that when Martin returned in 1420 after a long exile imposed on him for legalising and protecting the abuses of the Curia, he found cows still grazing in its streets.

Martin was so infuriated when he learned that Oxford professor John Wycliffe (c. 1324–1384), some five decades earlier, had translated the Bible into English that in 1427 he had the theologian's bones dug up, crushed and scattered in the River Swift. This was 43 years after Wycliffe's death, and the pope's actions reflect the vagaries of an unbalanced mind, hardly compatible with sanity.

During those "centuries of cultural darkness, the papal court was more depraved than at any period of the Dark Ages" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, Pecci ed., ii, p. 337), and the Church hoped that Catholics "looked forward to the time when the religious orders, whose laxity had been occasioned in great measure by the general looseness of the times, would be restored to some sort of discipline" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, i, pp. 288–89).

Christian writers regard the 15th and 16th centuries as decadent, but few of them give their readers even a faint idea of the flagrancy of vice, the deliberate corruption of monasteries, the vast spread and public encouragement of prostitution, the indecency of the numerous communal baths, the fiendish cruelty which persisted in spite of the efflorescence of art, and the cynical growth of treachery and lying in international Christian relations. Dr Ludwig Pastor (1854–1928), a sincere German historian of the papacy, almost alone among Catholic historians is candid. He says that "the prevailing immorality in Church orders exceeded anything that has been witnessed since the tenth century" and that "wanton cruelty and vindictiveness went hand in hand with immorality" (*A History of the Popes*, op. cit., chapter 1, p. 97).

The epoch that occupies us is, without doubt, one of the strangest in Church history, one in which we meet with the greatest amount of crime and decadence. The Church says that a period of "decline followed after the middle of the thirteenth century, when war and rapine did much injury ... the Church suffered again in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from the prevailing social disturbances" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, i, p. 145).

Speaking of moral conditions current in the age, the Vatican summarises its position in the time of Pope Sixtus IV (1471–84):

**One probable reason for Sixtus's negation of the rulings of the Council of Constance is that the gathering decreed that a woman, Joan Anglicus VIII, officially occupied the papal chair for two years in the ninth century (855–58).**

"His dominating passion was nepotism, heaping riches and favors on his unworthy relatives. His nephew, the Cardinal Rafael Riario, plotted to overthrow the Medici; the pope was cognizant of the plot, though probably not of the intention to assassinate, and even laid Florence under an interdict because it rose in fury against the conspirators and brutal murderers of Giuliano dei Medici. Henceforth, until the Reformation, the secular interests of the papacy were of paramount importance. The attitude of Pope Sixtus IV towards the conspiracy of the Pazzi, his wars and treachery, his promotion to the highest offices in the Church of undesirable people are blots upon his career.

Nevertheless, there is a praiseworthy side to his pontificate. He took measures to suppress abuses in the Inquisition, vigorously opposed the Waldenses, and annulled the decrees of the Council of Constance."

(*Catholic Encyclopedia*, xiv, pp. 32–33)

One probable reason for Sixtus's negation of the rulings of the Council of Constance is that the gathering decreed that a woman, Joan Anglicus VIII, officially occupied the papal chair for two years in the ninth century (855–58). Unlike Marozia, who ruled

the papacy for several decades in the 10th century, Joan was formally elected pope, and thus in Catholic eyes was a legitimate successor of St Peter. Her story entered the mediaeval historical record in Thomas de Elmham's *Official List of Popes* which said: "AD 855, Joannes. This does not count; she was a woman." Sixtus IV drafted plans for the nunneries to become "brothels filled with the choicest prostitutes, lean with fasting, but full of lust" (*A History of the Popes*, op. cit.; also similar descriptions of the nunneries centuries earlier are in the *Annals of Hildesheim*, c. 890).

About this juncture, and after a thousand years of bewildering Church history, the protests of Christendom swelled steadily and then broke into the Protestant Reformation, a religious revolution by force and arms. An apologetic overview of the debauchery of Church morals and minds which made possible this major



This 1459 German woodcut shows Pope Pius II as a young man wearing a balaclava and breaking into a house. It was widely distributed in Rome by anti-papal groups, and after its release Protestants used the hype to ridicule the feigned holiness of the Catholic Church. (© Ancient Documents, Rathaus, Aachen)



restructuring of Catholicism is affirmed in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

"Churchmen in high places were constantly unmindful of truth, justice, purity, self-denial; many were unworthy and had lost all sense of Christian ideals; not a few were deeply stained by pagan vices; most were common rogues. In the years of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II, 1458–64), Giovanni Battista Cibo (Pope Innocent VIII, 1484–1492), the career of Rodrigo Borgia (Alexander VI, 1492–1503), the life of Alexander [Alessandro] Farnese, afterwards Paul III (1534–49), until he was compelled to reform himself as well as the Curia, the pontiffs showed disregard for the most elementary human virtues."

(*Catholic Encyclopedia*, i, 109, Pecci ed.; also, xii, 767, passim)

Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, Giovanni Battista Cibo and Rodrigo Borgia are three men worthy of further discussion.

When Piccolomini became Pope Pius II in 1458, he tried to suppress all knowledge of his earlier career as a thief and housebreaker. However, he was unsuccessful: broad sheets depicting his activities were in wide circulation.

After Cibo blatantly bought the votes of cardinals to become Pope Innocent VIII in 1484, he rewarded those who

supported him with immense wealth, splendour and glory. As pope, however, Cibo's only interests were women and sex. The Vatican became an establishment overrun by his vast progeny of more than 100 illegitimate children, and the cost of maintaining his women, sons, daughters and grandchildren was enormous. "To the open scandals caused by the pope's morals and policies, the advancement of his bastard children [particularly Franceschetto] and his collaboration with the heathen [women] ...were added the results of corruption in the Curia" (*The Popes: A Concise Biographical History*, op. cit., pp. 302-04). The contemporary Italian Church historian Valore related that, through gross self-indulgence, Innocent VIII grew immensely fat and by the spring of 1492 had become "a mass of flesh incapable of assimilating any nourishment but a few drops of milk from a young woman's breast" (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, MS 151, p. 1181).

### The orgy in the Vatican

Upon the death of Innocent VIII, and after 14 days of wrangling and intrigue by the cardinals, Rodrigo Borgia (1431–1503) was

elected Pope Alexander VI. During the time of the conclave, armed factions called "squadrons" murdered more than 200 people on the streets of Rome. The splinter groups were angered because Borgia, who had amassed immense wealth, had paid out heavy bribes to the electors before the commencement of the conclave. Eleven cardinals sold their votes to him (*Diarium of Burchard*, appendix to vol. iii) and the Church supports this fact: "That Borgia secured his election by the rankest simony is a fact too well authenticated to admit a doubt" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, Pecci ed., ii, p. 309). When proceeding to the Lateran Palace after consecration in St Peter's, he passed under a triumphal arch which bore the motto erected by his supporters: "Caesar was a man; this is a god".



Alexander VI, "...the Borgia pope under whom the Renaissance papacy reached its lowest level of corruption" (*The Papacy*, George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd, London, 1964, p. 107). This is a detail from a fresco by Italian painter Bernardino Pinturicchio (d. 1513) in the Borgia apartment of the Vatican. Like many Renaissance painters, Pinturicchio delighted in concealing veiled information in the background of his creations and in this work he subtly depicts a scantily dressed lady in the top left corner, looking over her shoulder at the pope. Maybe she is meant to represent Lucrezia, Alexander's daughter. (© Library of the Popes, Venice)

the Whores, and the parade of his sexual licence was maintained with little or no concealment. It is from the diary of German chaplain Johann Burchard, Pope Alexander VI's master of ceremonies, that we learn the most about the character of this Borgia pope. Burchard personally witnessed Alexander's debauchery and wrote the famous comment saying that "the pope's Christianity was a pretence" (*Diarium of Burchard*).

Alexander VI was so notoriously infamous and his history so large and well known that he has proved a great embarrassment to the modern Church vainly trying to portray a pious papal past. He has a unique record among the popes for the public prominence of his illegitimate children and the blatancy of his amours in the "Sacred Palace". With his 12 bastard children (*Collins Dictionary*), including Cesare, Giovanni (Juan), Lucrezia and Jofré, and his numerous mistresses, the "Vatican was again a brothel" (*The Records of Rome*, 1868, British Library) and his debauched papal court was compared to the ancient "fleshpots" of

Rodrigo was a member of the infamous Borgia family who derived their prominence and power from Italian politics. His Spanish origins were a factor in his election, since the cardinals wished to avoid electing a Frenchman. He served five earlier popes in the post of vice-chancellor, and his election vacated a large number of lucrative offices and preferments which he promised to those who undertook to vote for him. As early as 1460, when he was cardinal and papal legate, he had been reported to Pius II (1458–62) for holding obscene dances with naked ladies in a garden at Siena, and he continued to enjoy such spectacles until the end of his life. His pontificate provided one of the gravest scandals in the Vatican since the Reign of

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Caesarea in which St Augustine (d. 430) revelled. Alexander VI was a sexual pervert, and lurid stories were bandied about by the intellectual underworld of Rome.

Venetian Senator Sanuto wrote that the then Cardinal Borgia fancied Rosa Vannozza dei Cattanei, the pretty young married daughter of his chamberlain, whom Borgia paid to arrange a series of secret daytime liaisons with her. As a result of this affair, Cesare Borgia (1475–1507) was born, and the birth certificate acknowledges this.

In his teenage years, a bitter Cesare, in his father's presence, stabbed the chamberlain, decapitated him and pierced his head on a pole with an attached inscription saying: "This is the head of my grandfather who prostituted his daughter to the pope" (*A History of the Popes*, op. cit., Alexander VI chapter). The evidence is serious.

It was claimed that Alexander VI had sex with Lucrezia (1480–1519), his daughter by Rosa Vannozza dei Cattanei. One wit of Rome called Lucrezia "the pope's

daughter, wife and daughter-in-law", and he reportedly fathered "nieces" with her (*A History of the Popes*, *ibid.*). It is not worth serious enquiry here whether he had two or three children with Lucrezia, as most acknowledge, but other aspects of his conduct must be noted.

Cesare was Rodrigo Borgia's favourite son. When Cesare was only seven, his father prepared his way to the College of Cardinals by making him a bishop, from which he received a substantial income. When Cesare was eighteen, his father, as Pope Alexander VI, conferred cardinality upon him and later elevated him to commander of the Vatican military in its efforts to extend the Papal States. Cesare grew into a man of clear and powerful intellect and the pope supported him until his death.

Rodrigo gravely abused his position as both a cardinal and the head of the Church in establishing a scheme of family aggrandisement, seen in the rapid advancement of the careers of his children Pedro Luis (1468–88) (for whom he purchased the duchy of Gandía, the Borgias' ancestral home in Valencia, Spain), Cesare, Giovanni (c. 1476–97) (the

second Duke of Gandía) and Lucrezia.

Ambassadors speak of Cesare's introduction of multitudes of beautiful courtesans into the Vatican for Alexander's sexual pleasure in his later years. Burchard gives us astonishing details of one occasion in which the pope presided at an orgy in the Papal Palace:

"On Sunday evening, 30 October [1501], Don Cesare Borgia gave his father a supper in the apostolic palace, with 50 decent prostitutes or courtesans in bright garb in attendance, who after the meal danced with the servants and others there, first fully dressed and then naked.

"Following the supper, lampstands holding lighted candles were placed on the floor and chestnuts strewn about, which the prostitutes, naked and on their hands and knees, had to pick up with their mouths as they crawled in and out among the lampstands.

"The Pope watched and admired their noble parts. The evening ended with an obscene contest of these women, coupled with male servants of the Vatican, for prizes which the Pope presented.

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"Don Cesare, Donna Lucrezia and the Pope later each took a partner of their liking for further dalliances."

(*Diarium* of Burchard)

Against this backdrop, and because of his debauched lifestyle, Alexander VI could not escape the satirists, pamphleteers and other wits who sold or distributed their deadly epigrams to his opponents.

After the release in 1501 of a Latin-language broadsheet bearing an illustration of Pope Alexander as the Devil and Antichrist, the city of Rome shook with cynical laughter. This broadsheet speaks of Alexander dabbling in black magic and other pagan rituals, of having a Venus emblem inlaid in his personal emerald Christian cross and of having an "offensive" painting of a naked Isis hanging in the papal bedroom (Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Milan, 1907 reprint).

At that time, witchcraft was an ecclesiastical rather than a civil concern, and the documentation reveals that the

pope's personal beliefs were not that of Christian orthodoxy.

This remark, buried away in a collection of once-suppressed papal pronouncements called *Anecdota Ecclesiastica* or "Secret Church Histories" (Vienta, Paris, 1822 reprint of 1731 ed.) and confirmed in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* reveals what Pope Alexander VI really thought of Christianity: "Almighty God! How long will this superstitious sect of Christians, and this upstart invention, endure?"

We may set aside as negligible gossip the charge of his enemies that Alexander VI made liberal use of poison in his later years, for in serious academic history the claim is reduced to only two disputed deaths.

But the cover-ups and support for the vile murders committed by Cesare Borgia, "a coldly inhumane monster", argue for a totally unprincipled character who made his name more malodorous than that of Nero. "That such accusations were made against the Borgia pope and that they managed to survive, together indicate the fear and hatred which he and his son aroused" (*The Popes*, op. cit., p. 324).

In 1497, Cesare Borgia had his brother

Giovanni murdered out of jealousy, and in 1500 organised the murder of Lucrezia's husband, Alfonso of Aragon, because he wanted her to contract an alliance of greater political advantage.

Giovanni "...was fished out of the Tiber with his throat cut... [Alexander] took it as a warning from heaven to repent, and no one felt it more keenly than the pope himself. He spoke of resigning, and proclaimed his determination to set about that reform of the Church 'in Head and members' for which the world had so long been clamoring" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, xiv, 32, 33).

But his grief was assuaged by the attentions of his lady loves, notably pretty Giulia Farnese, the fifteen-year-old sister of the "petticoat cardinal" Alessandro Farnese and whose picture as the Virgin Mary adorns one of the great frescoes of the Vatican.

Her brother later became Pope Paul III, and we should not be surprised to read in Burchard's *Diarium* that Giulia's daughter Laura was fathered by Pope Alexander VI.

It was this same pope who had the ascetic Italian religious reformer Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98) and his two

Dominican disciples hanged and then burned for "religious error" at Florence in May 1498.

Amidst his dissoluteness, however, Alexander was aware of the "silent spread of suspicion in the intelligentsia, even in the clergy themselves" about the validity of Christianity, and, realising that his institution could not afford to have its credentials checked, he moved quickly to establish censorship of damaging publications (*Diarium* of Burchard, op. cit.).

In 1501 he issued an edict ordering that no book discussing the Christian religion be printed without the written approval of the local archbishop or "bearing the personal permission and privilege of the Pope" (*Diarium* of Burchard, *ibid.*). This was the beginning of the Index of Prohibited Books, and the suppression of books challenging Church dogma soon became official Vatican policy. It was perhaps the most dramatic form of censorship known to the world, by which the Church for centuries policed the literature available to the public, and it maintained official sanction well into the 20th century.

Alexander VI died in 1503 and his infamous career came to a welcome end. His passing was greeted with celebrations in the streets of Rome; the papal doctor was sent gifts and was congratulated for failing to keep the pope alive.

Soon after his death, his body became black and fetid, lending colour to rumours that he was poisoned. (Historically, the Church of Rome bears the heavy burden of the murder of up to 40 popes, many by poison.) Undertakers and porters, "joking and blaspheming" says Burchard, had trouble forcing the swollen corpse into the coffin built for it.

Gossip added that a little devil had been seen at the moment of death, carrying Alexander's soul to hell. The Romans joked about him, saying that had his mother foreseen the nature of the life her son was to live she would have strangled him at birth.

The same could be said for the mother of the next pope, Julius II, whose life and remarks make Christian historians squirm, for again we find evidence of another disbelieving pope.

**To be continued next issue...**

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Tony Bushby, an Australian, became a businessman and entrepreneur very early in his life. He established a magazine-publishing business and spent 20 years researching, writing and publishing his own magazines, primarily for the Australian and New Zealand markets. With his strong interest in metaphysical subjects, he has developed longstanding relationships with many associations and societies throughout the world that have assisted his research by making their archives available.

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