CHAPTER 6

The Papal Hospital: Santo Spirito in Sassia

Lotharius, a Father with a great heart, was made pope with the name of Innocent III—a man whom no more learned or sagacious pope ever succeeded until Sixtus.

ROBERT FLEMMYNG, Lucubraciunculae Tiburtinae

It is a bastion of the history of Renaissance Rome that in the fifteenth century the Vatican became the permanent seat of a papacy forging the masterwork of its absolutist rule. The Renaissance popes, however, only completed a project launched by Innocent III (1198–1216) two and a half centuries earlier. Times had changed between the early thirteenth century and the late fifteenth, but certain conditions seemed to offer themselves with renewed poignancy. Papal primacy was under siege, the attacks now coming from within the ranks of the Latin Church.

The Great Schism of the Church (1378–1417), when rival candidates contended the papal throne, had brought in its wake attempts to curtail papal authority by subjecting it to a council of bishops. The Council of Pisa, in 1409, and that of Constance, which began in 1414, imposed the view that it was not the pope, but the episcopal council as a whole who received its authority directly from Christ, and that the pope was bound to obey its decrees. The Councils’ success in securing the withdrawal or deposition of three rival popes supplied a strong argument in favor of conciliar authority, and the sentiment that regularly convoked Councils were the form of Church government most in harmony with the needs of turbulent times gained rapid ground.

Skepticism about papal theories blossomed in the conducive climate of humanism, as the great Latinists scrutinized with newfound competence ancient texts. Nicholas of Cusa, conciliar theorist and philosopher, who


2 A recent account of this period of Church history is in Frank Welsh, The Battle for Christendom: The Council of Constance, the East-West Conflict and the Dawn of Modern Europe (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 2008), 80–87, for the authority of Councils in troubled times, pp. 88ff on the Council of Constance, and pp. 241ff on that of Basel.
searched for manuscripts of Plato in Byzantium, attacked in 1431 the authenticity of the Donation of Constantine, the document on which the popes had based their claim to secular jurisdiction over the West since the eighth century. When making their case for Roman primacy at the Council of Florence—which in 1439 brought together Eugene IV (1431–1447), the Eastern Emperor John VIII Palaeologus (1425–1448), and the patriarchs of the Eastern Churches seeking common doctrinal ground—papal delegates prudently omitted mention of the Donation. Between 1439 and 1440, Lorenzo Valla dealt the Donation the final blow, demonstrating that the vernacular Latin of the document could not have been written in a fourth-century imperial chancellery, but must have been produced in much later medieval times.\(^3\)

Papal control over urban territory was equally disputed. The Senate, the civic government of Rome, did not formally or even substantially challenge papal authority. Stefano Porcari’s short-lived conspiracy to reinstate a republic in 1453 was the last and an already illusory attempt to overthrow papal

---