REJECT AENEAS!
PIUS II ON THE ERRORS OF HIS YOUTH

Thomas M. Izbicki

Believe the old man more than the youth, nor count the private man of more value than the pontiff. Reject Aeneas; accept Pius!

These words of Pope Pius II (1458-1464) in the bull In minoribus agentes (26 April 1462) are among the most familiar from his pen.¹ They form a part of an apologia of the Piccolomini pope for his present policies and a recantation of the errors of his youth. These errors are not those sins of the flesh which loom so large in the modern consciousness. Aeneas had indeed fathered two illegitimate children, at least one of whom died young; but he admitted later to having abandoned Venus for Bacchus in his middle years:

Dearest brother, I am full; stuffed; Venus makes me nauseous! Also, it is true that my powers have declined. I am sprinkled with grey hairs; the muscles are withered; the bones, rotten; the body is shrivelled with wrinkles. Neither am I able to bring pleasure to a woman; nor is a woman able to give pleasure to me. I celebrate with Bacchus more than with Venus. Wine nourishes me; helps me; delights me; makes me happy. This liquid will be charming to me all the way to death. But it also would be a sin were I to drink more for pleasure than from necessity.²

² See Der Briefwechsel des Eneas Silvius Piccolomini, ed. R. Wolkan, Fontes rerum Austriacarum: Oesterreichische Geschichtsquellen. 2. Abt., Diplomataria et Acta 61 / 62 / 67 / 68 (Vienna, 1909 / 1909 / 1912 / 1918), esp. vol. 61, pp. 188-191, 448-449 for Aeneas’s explanations of his amorous exploits to his father. For his later abandonment of sex for wine, see Wolkan, Briefwechsel (Fontes, vol. 67), pp. 30-33. He remained permissive toward the sexual
Rather these errors were of a political nature, adherence first to the Council of Basel (1431-1449) in its struggle with Pope Eugenius IV (1431-1447), later to the policy of neutrality maintained by many of the German princes in the struggle between pope and council.\(^3\) Two things about this bull, with its play on the resemblance of Piccolomini’s personal and regnal names to that of Virgil’s hero, the pious Aeneas, need to be underlined. The first is his previous use of this play on names in letters concerned with ecclesiastical polities. The second is the place of In minoribus as the last of a small group of apologies by Aeneas for the political errors of his youth.

For both of these points we must have recourse not just to Aeneas’s literary works, but also to his letters. These texts are to be used with due caution, as Cecil Clough has reminded us.\(^4\) Nonetheless, they can provide insights into the life and times of the Piccolomini pope. Aeneas first alluded to his namesake in a letter dating from his years as a conciliar secretary. In a letter to Emperor Sigismund written in 1437, an effort is made to win the aging prince over to Basel’s side in its struggle with Pope Eugenius. A subsidiary target of Aeneas’s letter is Venice, the pontiff’s native city. Venetian ambitions are described in this

peccadillos of the young; see Wolk, Briefwechsel (Fontes, vol. 61) pp. 245-247.

\(^3\) Aeneas’s role in these conflicts can be traced in J. Stieber, Pope Eugenius IV, the Council of Basel and the Secular and Ecclesiastical Princes in the Empire (Leiden, 1978). For a brief description by Aeneas of neutrality as confined only to the Germans, see Historia Friderici III imperatoris, ed. A.F. Kollar, Analecta monumentorum omnis aevi Vindobonensis, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1762-63; reprint Farnborough, 1970), vol. II, p. 114.