
*The Papacy since 1500* is not a study of all the men who have occupied the Chair of Peter since the beginning of the sixteenth century. In its twelve chapters, the focus is rather on certain popes who have played significant roles, albeit for good or for ill, in the life of the Roman Catholic Church. The editors are both Jesuits and, along with the other ten authors, they represent a wide national range including Great Britain, Ireland, the United States and the Continent of Europe. Each author has contributed an essay drawing from their own field of specialization and together they have produced an extraordinarily rich contribution to papal studies.

Each chapter is presented with reference to what the editors call ‘an interpretative lens’ which considers each pope in relation to three categories: the pope as prince, as patron (of the arts), and as pastor. Of these the first and third receive special emphasis since, as the sub-title indicates, these essays reveal a remarkable change in the understanding of the papal office both by the men who held that office and the church which they served, and in the relation of each of them to the social, political and cultural aspects of the world in which they lived.

The first chapter, by Frederic J. Baumgartner, considers the pontificate of Julius II (1503-13) who is seen as ‘the epitome of the Renaissance pope’. In his lifetime, Julius was characterized as *terribile* (p. 12). From most perspectives, the popes of the Renaissance represent the moral nadir in the history of the papacy. The distinguished American historian Barbara W. Tuchman speaks of the significance of the Renaissance popes in terms of their immediate and also long range impact upon the Church and society at large:

> Over a period of sixty years, from roughly 1470 to 1530, the secular spirit of the age was exemplified in a succession of six popes – five Italians and a Spaniard – who carried it to an excess of venality, amorality, avarice, and spectacularly calamitous power politics. Their governance dismayed the faithful, brought the Holy See into disrepute, left unanswered the cry for reform, ignored all protests, warnings and signs of rising revolt, and ended by breaking apart the unity of Christendom and losing half the papal constituency to the Protestant secession. Theirs was a folly of perversity, perhaps the most...
consequential in Western history, if measured by its result in centuries of ensuing hostility and fratricidal war.¹

Although Baumgartner does not paint his picture of the papacy of Julius II in such bleak terms, he is, like all of the authors in this collection, quite open in his description of the negative aspects of his subject. One is reminded that the famous dictum of Lord Acton: ‘Power tends to corrupt; and absolute power corrupts absolutely’ – was made with reference to the Renaissance popes.²

Julius II is a particularly appropriate example of the first part of the three-part grid, that is, as prince, or more precisely as the embodiment of a monarchical understanding of the papacy. It is clear from any consideration of his reign that Julius understood his office in imperial terms to such an extent that in a campaign to recover control of the Papal States, he led his troops wearing full armour. He became known as ‘the warrior pope’. This offers an important perspective to the remarkable transformation of the understanding of the papal office which the essays of this collection present. It is as documentation of this transformation that, for this reviewer, The Papacy since 1500 is most useful.

For the popes of the Renaissance, the monarchical character of the papacy was taken for granted. This monarchical view was grounded in the reforms associated with Pope Gregory VII (1073-85), ‘the Gregorian reform of the Church’. This was a strictly hierarchical pattern for the organization of Church and society. One may argue that at times this pattern played a positive role, particularly with reference to medieval Western society. In this pattern, all authority was understood to come uniquely from God, and was embodied on earth, again uniquely, in the papacy.

Although each essay in The Papacy since 1500 stands on its own terms as an independent piece, the subtitle of the book suggests that the editors’ intention was to awaken readers to this extraordinary transformation of the

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¹ ‘The Renaissance Popes Provoke the Protestant Secession: 1470–1530’, in The March of Folly (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), p. 52. (Tuchman notes that two other popes served during this period, but one [Pius III] died only a month after his election, and the other [Hadrian VI], the last non-Italian to reign until John Paul II, recognized the need for reform but found no support for that project among the cardinals. He died after a reign of less than two years.)