Thirteenth Annual Birthday Lecture:

Some Underlying Factors in the Erasmus-Pio Debate*

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Among Erasmus’ numerous opponents on either side of the religious divide of the early sixteenth century, few proved more difficult to handle than Alberto Pio. It was dangerous to ignore or needlessly antagonize the Italian prince of Carpi. Erasmus could not write him off as he had so many of his other opponents as ignorant friars or irrelevant professors of outmoded scholasticism. Pio was a layman who enjoyed an international reputation as an eloquent and learned orator, and as a patron of leading humanists. This nephew of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola had been well trained in Latin and Greek literature and in patristic and scholastic theology. His abilities as an orator and diplomat had ultimately led to his representing Emperor Maximilian I and then King Francis I of France at the courts of popes Julius II, Leo X, and Clement VII. Pio himself was connected by marriage to important aristocratic families: by his mother to the Gonzaga of Mantua and by his wife to the Orsini of Rome and to the Medici of Florence. He was an intimate friend of Clement VII and his views were listened to in the humanistic circles and at the papal court of Rome. 1 Pio’s

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criticisms of Erasmus were not something that could be lightly ignored. This paper will briefly trace the history of their controversy, the principal concerns of the antagonists, the various charges they made against each other, and their differing assumptions about what can and should be changed in the Church.

The literary exchanges between Erasmus and Pio grew out of reports that Pio was denouncing Erasmus as the cause of the Reformation tragedy at dinner parties and social gatherings in Rome. Erasmus’ letter of 13 May 1525 to a mutual friend, Celio Calcagnini of Ferrara, complaining of Pio’s reported behavior was answered with praise for the character of Pio and with the advice that one should not put credence in rumors. Calcagnini did not offer to intervene on Erasmus’ behalf. On 10 October 1525 Erasmus wrote directly to Pio, reiterating the derogatory comments Pio was reported to be making in Rome. Erasmus affirmed his loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church, rehearsed the history of his relations with Luther, and urged Pio to put aside as unfair and dangerous to him any claims that Erasmus agreed with or supported Luther’s condemned positions. Despite the press of difficult diplomatic negotiations, Pio penned in elegant Ciceronian Latin a lengthy reply which he dated 15 May 1526. While praising Erasmus’ skills as a humanist, Pio repeated the old charges that Erasmus had helped the Protestants by his imprudent, subversive, and heterodox attacks on the Church and was still refusing to write


Erasmus to Celio Calcagnini, 13 May 1525, Allen 1576: 38–48; Calcagnini to Erasmus, 6 July 1525, Allen 1587: 229–48.

Erasmus to Pio, 10 October 1525, Allen 1634: 1–11. Pio received this letter in Rome on 14 November 1525—see his Responsio, I.