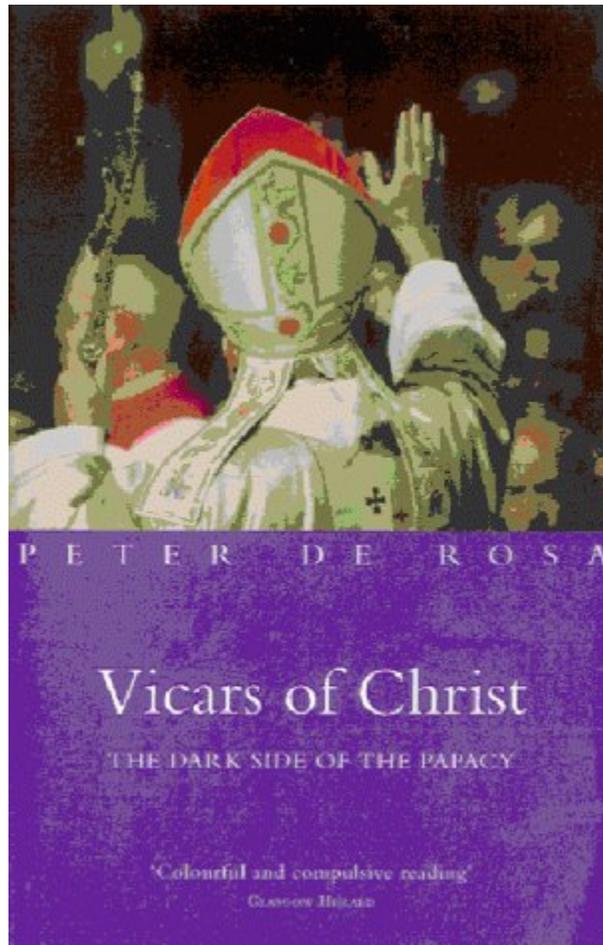


Vicars of Christ

The Dark Side of the Papacy

By Peter de Rosa



Extract of Book

Chapter XII

Papal Heretics

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

Papal Heretics

'Many Roman Pontiffs were heretics'. To Catholics this sounds like a quote from a bigoted Protestant. A heretical pope seems as contradictory as a square circle. The First Vatican Council said that the pope, without needing the consent of the church, is the infallible judge of orthodoxy. It is surely unthinkable that a pope like John Paul II could separate himself from the truth and, therefore, from the church by falling into heresy?

The quote is not in fact from a Protestant but from *Pope Adrian VI* in 1523.

If by the Roman church you mean its head or pontiff, it is beyond question that he can err even in matters touching the faith. He does this when he teaches heresy by his own judgement or decretal. In truth, many Roman Pontiffs were heretics. The last of them was *Pope John XXII* (1316-34).



The themes of papal heretics and popes excommunicated by the church used to be common in theology but little has been heard of them since 1870. Even the imperious Innocent III admitted: 'I can be judged by the church for a sin concerning matters of faith.' *Innocent IV*, though he claimed that every creature was subject to him as *Vicar of the Creator*, none the less conceded that any papal utterance that is heretical or tends to divide the church is not to be obeyed. 'Of course,' he said 'a pope can err in matters of faith. Therefore, no one ought to say, I believe that because the Pope believes it, but because the Church believes it. If he follows the Church he will not err.' For some reason these words which appeared in the original text of *Innocent IV's Commentary on the Decalogue* were expunged from later editions. It is hard to know why, since any number of popes said more or less the same.

Fallible Popes

So great is the aura surrounding the papacy today that few Catholics realize that it is against the fait and tradition to say a pope cannot fall into heresy. The pope was fallible long before he was infallible. From the earliest times it was taken for granted that Roman pontiffs not only can err but have erred in fundamental matters of Christian doctrine. Nor did anyone hasten to add in those distant days: 'Of course, he only erred as a private teacher or theologian.' That suggests that in addition to his own convictions and his responses by his diocesans he also regulated the faith of the whole church. There is no evidence for this. What is known today as papal infallibility was not even hinted at in the early church, and any suggestion that a Bishop of Rome was himself infallible would have aroused at time a degree of mirth. The church's faith belonged to the church and was regulated by the successors of all the apostles, namely, the bishops. They testified to the faith of their communities, especially when they met together in a General Council. A pope who stepped out of line in matters of faith was condemned as a heretic. Peter made mistakes. So did the Bishop of Rome. When he did so, the church had the right and duty to correct or depose him. After all, the pope, too, was a member of the church, not some sort of divine oracle separate from it.

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

Not merely the idea of infallibility but even the germ of the idea was lacking in patristic times. Rome was by agreement the most eminent See in the west. Peter and Paul taught there and died there. Their bones made it a place of pilgrimage, of light and hope. In spite of this, in the first three centuries, only one of the Fathers, Irenaeus, connects Rome's primacy with doctrine. Not even he relates this personally to the *Bishop of Rome*.

In all the Greek Fathers there is not one word about the prerogatives of the Bishop of Rome, no suggestion he had jurisdiction over them. No one, Greek or Latin, appeals to the Bishop of Rome as final and universal arbiter in any single dispute about the faith. As a point of fact, no Bishop of Rome dared decide on his own a matter of faith for the church.

Roma locuta est, causa finite est. St Augustine's phrase, 'Rome has spoken, the dispute is at an end', is quoted endlessly by Catholic apologists. With reason. Out of ten huge folios of his work, that is the one phrase which proves that the Bishop of Rome has, on his own, the right to settle controversies in the church. But does he? The context shows Augustine arguing that after two synods, with the Bishop of Rome concurring, it is time to call a halt. Repeatedly Augustine calls on synods to settle disputes. When Pope Stephen tried to settle a baptismal controversy for the African church and his view was rejected, Augustine says they were right to do so. This was a matter for the church not for an individual.

Augustine spent a great deal of his life disputing with the rival church of the *Donatists*. Never once does he suggest that they have separated themselves from the center of unity. Rome; he knows no such center for the church as a whole. He never says, for instance, as modern popes say: 'Return to Rome, believe all that the pope teaches.'

In 434, *Vincent of Lerins* laid down the criteria of Catholic doctrine: it must be held always, everywhere, by everyone. He does not mention a role for Rome or its Bishop. The faith is formulated by a Council not by an individual Bishop.

Pope Pelagius (556-60) talks of heretics separating themselves from the Apostolic Sees, that is, Rome, Jerusalem, Alexandria plus Constantinople. In all the early writings of the hierarch there is no special mention of a role for the Bishop of Rome, nor yet the special name of 'Pope'. Patriarchs are mentioned, of which Rome was first because of Peter and Paul, archbishops, metropolitans and bishops. No mention of, no role for a pope, not even in *Isidore of Seville*, the great author of the seventh century.

Another astonishing omission in view of Vatican I: of the eighty or so heresies of the first six centuries, not one refers to the authority of the Bishop of Rome, not one is settled by the Bishop of Rome. Episcopacy in general sometimes comes under attack; no one attacks the authority of the Roman pontiff, *because no one has heard of it*.

After Peter, the centuries roll by, full of controversies, any one of which today would involve immediate recourse to Rome for a decision. In those days, no Bishop of Rome ventures to try to solve them and not one bishop asks him to do so. *Pope Siricius* (384-98) was no *Gregory VII*. When a certain Bishop Bonosius fell into heresy, he refused to pronounce against him because, he said, he had no right to do so. It would have to be settled by the province's bishops.

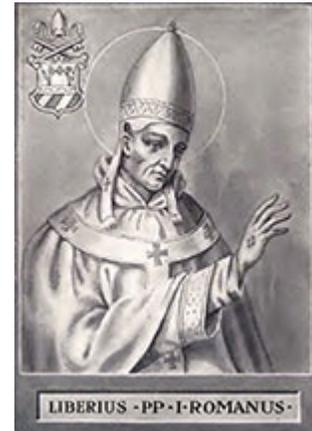
Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

We already noted that not a single Father can find any hint of a Petrine office in the great biblical texts that refer to Peter. Papal supremacy and infallibility, so central to the Catholic church today, are simply not mentioned. Not a single creed, nor confession of faith, nor catechism, nor passage in patristic writings contains one syllable about the pope, still less about faith and doctrine being derived from him.

Every indicator suggests that the Bishop of Rome is fallible, not infallible. In fact, the first pope to appeal to anything like what we know today as papal authority as *Agatho* in 680. He did so for a very embarrassing reason: a predecessor of his, Pope Honourius, was about to be condemned by a General Council for heresy.

A Long Line of Papal Heretics

The tradition of heresy among Bishops of Rome went back way beyond Honourius. Take *Liberius* (352-66). He did his best, like other bishops, to sort out the Arian controversy. Arius believed the Son was less than the Father. The great champion of orthodoxy was Athanasius. Liberius had been forced into exile, and the condition of his return was to condemn Athanasius. This he did, thereby suggesting that the Son was lower than the Father. For this, he earned the malediction of a very important Father, Hilary of Poitiers, who accused him of apostasy. ‘Anathema to thee, Liberius,’ was Hilary’s famous cry, and every orthodoxy bishop took it up. Liberius’ error was an unassailable proof throughout the Middle Ages that popes can fall into heresy like anyone else.



Other popes made unfortunate pronouncements. *Gregory the Great* said that unbaptized babies go straight to hell and suffer there for all eternity. Some pontiffs went further. Innocent I (401-417) wrote to the Council of Milevis and *Gelasius I* (492-96) wrote to the Bishops of Picenum that babies were obliged to receive communion. If they died baptized but uncommunicated, they would go straight to hell. This view was condemned by the Council of Trent.

The most Hamlet-like of all the popes was *Vigilius* (537-55), whose career reads like a theatrical piece.

Vigilius was a portly unscrupulous Roman official who was never popular. Pope Boniface II wanted him as his successor and wrote a letter nominating him as pope on his death. A crowd, furious that a pope dared to infringe their democratic rights as the clergy and people of Rome, forced him to burn it. It was an interesting moment. Had Boniface been allowed to get away with it, there might not have been any more papal elections. Certainly, after 1870, it would have been taken for granted that a pope appoint his successor. Who better than the Vicar of Christ, one with the plenitude of power, to elect the next successor to St Peter? But Romans in the sixth century insisted that Rome was their diocese and they had the right to choose who would rule over them.

Years later, Vigilius did manage to get himself elected pope. His was not a happy reign. Emperor Justinian forced him to join him in Constantinople and kept him there until the pontiff agreed with his

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

heterodox views about Jesus and the authority of the Council of Chalcedon. Vigilius changed his mind as often as the emperor put pressure on him.

Eventually, Justinian called the Fifth General Council. It met in May in the year 533 in the south gallery of the church of Saint Sophia in Constantinople. Only twenty-five Western bishops attended out of a complement of 165. Vigilius sent his apologies, pleading he was sick. His absence was not considered important enough to delay proceedings. The Council met and decided, among other things, that his Holiness was a heretic. He was, therefore, excommunicated.

When the pope got to hear of this, he condemned the Council's decision and all those who had excommunicated him. In a fury, Justinian banished him to Proconessus, a dreary rocky inlet near the western end of the Sea of Marmara. Rumors reached Vigilius there that a new election for pope was imminent back home and his own name had been struck out of the diptychs, the liturgical lists of pontiffs. His health was bad; he suffered agonies from the stone. After six months of this, he could take no more.

On 8 December 533, he sent a letter to the ne Patriarch of Constantinople in which he claimed that till now he had been deluded by 'wiles of the devil'. Satan had divided him from his fellow-bishops but, through the penalty of excommunication, he had seen the light. His former opinions, he admitted, were mistaken and, like the great Augustine, he wanted to retract. He accepted all the decrees of the Fifth Council and proclaimed them true and binding on the West.

Now that the pope had come round to his way of thinking, the emperor was prepared to let the pope go home. Back in Italy, a frosty reception awaited him. He only escaped a lynching by dying in Syracuse on 7 June 555. He was refused burial in St Peter's.

So outraged was Italy at Vigilius' conduct and his frequent changes of mind over the critical issue of whether Jesus was one or two persons that it refused at first to accept the legitimacy of the Fifth Council. The Archbishop of Milan and the Patriarch of Aquileia withdrew from communion with the Holy See in protest. It was left to the next pope, Pelagius I, to clear up the mess, with help from the military.

The significance of this controversy does not lie in what was debated at the time. It lies in the facts that the Council believed itself to be above the pope, so much so that it excommunicated and deposed him for heresy. During the Middle Ages, this was one of those famous case-histories that proved to all theologians that *a Council was superior to a pope*. It was not until much later that forgeries altered this settled conviction. Before then, no one ever *presumed* popes were orthodox by some sort of divine prerogative; they had to prove their orthodoxy like everyone else.

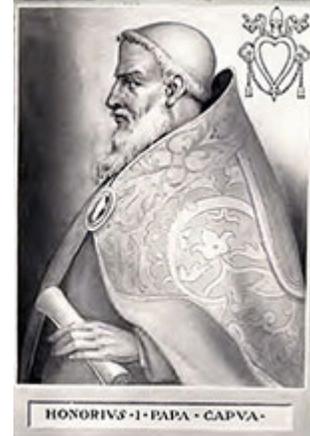
Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

The Heretical Pope Honorius

Honorius who was pontiff from 625 to 638, is the classic case of a pope condemned by the church for heresy. He was a remarkable man, holy, a good leader and fine statesman. He was, in moral stature, comparable with Gregory the Great.

His one fatal flaw was that, being a man of action, he disliked controversies because they wasted time which was better spent of serving God and the poor.

The Council of Chalcedon had settled that Christ had two natures; he was divine and human. A supplementary question was now asked: Did Christ have one will or two? In a much publicized letter, Honorius ridiculed those ‘bombastic and time-wasting philosophers’ who, in weighing up the two natures of Christ, ‘croak at us like frogs’. He was opposed to the two wills, though it is not clear why. Maybe he was merely reacting against the ideas of two contradictory wills in Christ. In any case, he was labelled a Monothelite or One-Will-ite. Honorius died before he could explain himself fully. But the letter brought about a heresy in the Eastern Church. These heretics appealed to it as proof that the pope approved of Monothelitism.



Forty years after Honorius’ death, the emperor wanted the matter cleared up. He suggested a General Council, which the new pope, Agathis, agreed to. He prepared for it by holding his own synods in Rome. The Easter synod of 680 condemned Monothelitism and claimed, for the very first time, that Rome had supremacy over the whole Church. They informed the emperor that the Roman church was his mother, and no one should dare say that she had ever erred in matters of faith. Had the synod never heard of Vigilius? It was probably this proud and unprecedented claim that sealed Honorius’ fate.

The Sixth General Council took place in the imperial Palace in Constantinople; it lasted from 7 November 680 to 16 September 681. The Monothelites maintained that Pope Honorius was on their side. The Council agreed. In condemning the Monothelites, the fathers also condemned *him*.

The 174 delegates approved the decrees; the papal legates, without any objections, signed first. The new pontiff Leo II, elected in 682, confirmed the condemnation of his predecessor. He wrote: ‘Honorius tried with profane treachery to subvert the immaculate faith.’ It was not a matter of condemning some private opinion or theological quirk. Leo condemned him for publically undermining the faith of the church. Why otherwise was a General Council involved? From this time on, all pontiffs were obliged at their consecration to endorse the council’s decision by an oath condemning Pope Honorius’ heresy.

Gregorovius, in his *Rome in the Middle Ages*, wrote: ‘The unique instance of a Roman Pope being publicly anathematized on the charge of heresy by an Ecumenical Council constitutes one of the most remarkable facts in ecclesiastical history.’ It matters little whether Honorius *was* a heretic or simply a plain blunt man who preferred deeds to words and tried to end controversy with a letter tossed off in a hurry. The key point is that a General Council, approved by a long line of popes, testified that the church

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

does NOT believe a pope is infallible. On the contrary, when he makes a mistake that misleads the church he has to be condemned, like anyone else, as a heretic. In matters of faith, the Bishop of Rome is as subject to a Council as any bishop is. Thus, nearly twelve centuries in advance, was denied papal infallibility as defined by a lesser Council of the fragmented Western church in 1870.

Rome's most persistent lack of orthodoxy was the area of the sacraments. This is part explained by the collapse of learning brought about by the barbarian invasions. The Greeks, mischievously, tended to look on Rome as full of simpletons.

From the eighth century on, certain popes annulled ordinations and re-ordained priests. It began with an antipope, *Constantine II*, in the year 769. But, as we saw, after *Pope Formosus* died in 896, not only was he disinterred and excommunicated for heresy, but his ordinations were also declared invalid. It raised the alarming question: Are there any valid sacraments in Italy of which the pope is patriarch? Popes *Stephen VII* and *Sergius III*, Marozui's lover, both taught that the ordinations of heretical popes are invalid.

This attack on the sacraments continued into the eleventh century. Popes decided that where simony – that is, payment – was involved in the ordination of a bishop the ordination was invalid. This prompted *Leo IX* (1049-54), probably prodded by *Hildebrand*, to re-ordain many priests. When Hildebrand became Gregory VII, he reaffirmed clearly that *all* ordinations involving money were invalid. Taken seriously this decision would have nullified most ordinations in the Western world. There would have been invalid masses or confessions or last rites in country after country. It would practically have wiped out the Apostolic Succession, a disaster that Leo XIII was to say happened to the Church of England after the Reformation.

Urban II (1088-99) went further than Hildebrand. Even if a bishop did not pay to be ordained, he said, the ordination would be invalid if the bishop who consecrates him paid for *his* ordination! This interpretation of the sacraments which flew in the face of the entire tradition found its way into the Decretals of Gratian. In spite of this immense authority of popes and canon law, for some inexplicable reason – the Holy Spirit? – this heresy did not gain currency in the West. The East held itself aloof from such heterodox opinions.

In 1557, *Paul IV*, in his Bull *Cum ex Apostolatus officio*, defined 'out of the plenitude of his power' that all the acts of previous heretical or schismatically inclined popes were null and void. It had a semblance of logic: a heretic pope was not even a Christian, let alone pontiff. But, put into operation, it would have exploded the whole Catholic sacramental system, which is of its nature hereditary. That is, it is handed on from one generation to the next. If one generation loses it – for instance –it is lost *forever*. However peculiar this may sound, it is orthodox Catholic teaching. For example, a child invalidly baptized by a priest who, in a stupor, says the wrong words or uses some liquid other than water might become a priest – all his masses and confessions are invalid; or a bishop – all his ordinations are invalid; or pope – most of the workings of the church are invalid. Happily, even Rome, that most intellectually rigorous of churches, does not take these matters to their logical conclusion. This may explain why it even turned its back on Gregory VII and Gratian over the sacraments.

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

It was not merely in the matter of ordinations that Rome strayed from the path of orthodoxy.

Pope Pelagius had said, correctly according to tradition, that the Trinity must be invoked for a valid baptism. *Nicholas I* (858-67) said that calling on the name of Christ is enough. Worse than this, he decided that confirmation administered by priests was invalid. At a stroke, he practically wiped out confirmation in the Greek church. The latter had from time immemorial allowed priests to confirm children. Pope Nicholas said the practice was invalid and the Eastern bishops would have to reconfirm the children. Perhaps the bishops had to be reconfirmed themselves! Rome's decision to 'annul' centuries of confirmations in their church naturally antagonized the Greeks and helped prepare for a permanent rift between East and West.

Rome's teaching on marriage was not without errors either.

Stephen II (752) went against the mainstream of tradition when he said a marriage between a free man and a slave girl, both Christians, can be dissolved, allowing the man to remarry. *Urban II* (1185-87) also suggested that there were circumstances in which a consummated marriage between Christians can be terminated. *Celestine III* (1191-98) spelled this out. A marriage between Christians, he said, can be dissolved if one of the parties chooses to become a heretic. For this, *Pope Adrian VI* pronounced *Pope Celestine* a heretic. Even Innocent III blundered on this topic. He insisted that Christians had to keep the Book of Deuteronomy *to the letter*. His Holiness had over-looked the fact the Deuteronomy allows a man to divorce his wife.

Popes have erred on the Eucharist. Apart from the early popes who, as we have seen, said that actual reception was necessary for salvation, even for babies, *Pope Nicholas II* (1059-61) said that Christ's body can be sensibly touched by hands and bitten by the teeth. The church rejected this view. Nicholas had an entirely mistaken notion of the real presence – not sacramental, at all – and seemed also to assert that, after his resurrection, Christ goes on suffering.

It was, however, an Avignon pope, John XXII, whom Adrian VI, in his book on the sacraments, singled out as a heretic of unusual proportions.

The Heresies of Pope John XXII

When Clement died in the year 1314, the conclave tried for two years to agree on a successor. Finally, in despair, they chose Jacques Duèse from Cahors. The date was 7 August; the place Lyons. The new pope took the name John XXI.

He seemed right for the job. Aged seventy-two, small, delicate, sickly-looking, this cobbler's son was unlikely to live long. John XXII was to prove a harsh and durable pontiff, ambitious, full of avarice, more worldly than a pimp, and with a laugh that crackled with unimprovable malice. This fragile little monster was to last for eighteen tempestuous years more.



Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

When he took over, the treasury was bare. Clement V had given away absolutely everything to his relatives. John set about rectifying matters. A financier of genius, he worked on the basis that what a pope can give a pope can sell. And he sold everything an imaginative Frenchman could think of. Forgiveness for every crime had a price. For example; Catholics could pay so much to be absolved from murder, so much from incest and sodomy. The worse Catholics behaved, the richer his Holiness became. When a pirated list of sins and rake-offs was published, it was thought to be a forgery concocted by the church's enemies. It was true, but the enemies were the pope and the Curia. By the weirdest alchemy, they were turning vices into gold. They were giving sinners the right to sin and break their vows, or at least the freedom to avoid the consequences of so doing.

John XXII needed money. He had a passion for war, especially the Italian wars. It was reckoned he spent 70 per cent of his income on armaments, which would have aroused wrath in St Peter and envy in Julius II. John's feuds with the Viscounts of Milan, in particular, proved costly. A contemporary said of him: 'The blood he shed would have incarnadined the waters of Lake Constance, and the bodies of the slain would have bridged it from shore to shore.'

The greediest of popes, who kept his brother and nephew in clover, contradicted several previous pontiffs on the subject of Christ's poverty.

Even during the lifetime of St Francis of Assisi, two sects had appeared among the brethren, one in favor of the strict observance, the other of moderation. In the year 1279, Nicholas III had patched up the quarrel by a *Bull Exiit qui seminat*. This passed into canon law. Nicholas said that poverty was not so much an individual as a communal thing. As such it was meritorious and holy. For this was the practice of Christ and his apostles.

Popes after him confirmed that Christ and the apostles lived in poverty; the gospels plainly said so. Honourous III, Innocent IV, Alexander IV, Nicholas III and Nicholas IV, Boniface VIII, Clement V – all were agreed.

Not John XXII. In *Bull Cum inter nonnullos* of 12 November 1323, he maintained: To say that Christ and the apostles had no property is a perversion of scripture.

The spiritual Franciscans, till then praised by the Holy See, were now labelled heretics; princes were obliged to send them to the stake or else face excommunication themselves. It was a feature of the times that this doctrinal issue turned into a political football. The emperor, Louis of Bavaria, had already rowed with John XXII when the latter said that in an interregnum *he* became administrator of the Empire and the new emperor had to take an oath of loyalty to *him*. John wanted to turn history on its head. For his part, Louis was delighted to be able to charge the pope with heresy. He called him Antichrist, deposed him and appointed another.

The emperor's choice fell on Pier di Corbario, a decrepit Franciscan who called himself Nicholas V. Unfortunately, Louis had not done his homework. Before long, an elderly lady appeared, claiming to be Mrs di Corbario. This was bad news. Pier, it seemed, was married with children when, without his wife's permission, he had left home to join a monastery. In terms of canon law, he was irregular; he was

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

not even a real monk, let alone a pontiff. It was true that John XXII had a son who was doing well for himself as a cardinal, but the pope never committed the sin of matrimony. Faced with a choice between a heretic pope and a married and irregular antipope, Louis opted for the latter. Nicholas's wife was paid off and he set about appointing cardinals and a Curia of his own. At least, the emperor mused, *my pope is a Catholic.*

In the end, Louis tired of playing games. He deserted Nicholas at Pisa and handed him over to the church's authorities. It was 18 June 1329.

John promised to be a kind father to this renegade which was rather like a sparrow-hawk promising to love a sparrow. On the way to Avignon, Nichols was maltreated in every possible way. People remembered John's Psalm-type curse on him: 'May his children be orphans and his wife a widow! May they be driven forth from their hearth to beggary.'

When Nicholas arrived in Provence as plain Pier di Corbario, John, contrary to all predictions, *was* kind to him. His life was spared; he was given rooms in the palace, though he was kept under house arrest. When he died four years later, he was buried in the Franciscan habit.

John XXII had triumphed. It was now official Catholic teaching: Christ and the apostles did not live a life of poverty.

The pope was eighty-seven-years-old when he created a fresh scandal on All Saints' day 1331.

The first clue was an English Dominican preached before the papal court that the souls of the just see God immediately. John had him tried by the Inquisition. To please his Holiness, the baffled inquisitors put the friar in gaol and nearly starved him to death.

In the church of Notre Dame de Doms in Avignon the pope now preached a sermon that caused a sensation. The souls of the saints, he said, do not have the vision of God prior to the resurrection of the body. They are still *sub altare Dei*, that is, under the altar of God. Only at the judgement will they be placed *on*, the altar to contemplate the divine essence.

No one in his entourage had the courage to tell him he was talking heresy.

On 5 January 1332 he enlarged his views to encompass the damned. There was, he told his astonished congregation, as yet no one in hell. Only at the end of the world will the damned go to the place of torment.

Once again, a theological dispute was transformed into politics. The emperor, in this instance, was supported by the Franciscan General, who John had excommunicated over the poverty issue, and the great Franciscan theologian William of Occam. For the second time, the pope was declared a heretic.

If the saints and the Blessed Virgin, the emperor argued, are not in heaven, how can they intercede for us? Why visit shrines of the saints who are not with God in heaven? Most pointedly, why should Christians pay the pope for pardon and indulgences if, when they die, they have to wait till Kingdom come to enter Paradise?

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

Just as a dead man is no longer a man, so the emperor concluded a heretic pope is no longer pope. Ex-Pope John XXII was now plain Jacques of Cahors.

Philippe de Valois supported Louis. He wrote to John telling him his views were heretical and if he did not withdraw them he would be burned. The University of Paris gave it as their opinion that the pope was sorely mistaken and should recant at once.

John, haughty as ever, offered rich benefices to anyone who could show him a passage in St Augustine that supported his view. No one could. Finally, it dawned on him that the whole church opposed him. Against every instinct, he wrote back to Paris, saying that he had never positively denied that the saints see God immediately after death, only that he had left it an open question. Even this lie was not good enough. European theologians replied to a man: it is *not* an open question. The church's mind could not be more closed.

At this point, the story becomes unclear. He changed his mind, some said, just before he died at the age of ninety. Others say he never changed his mind; he died as he had lived, a heretic. What is certain is this.

On 3 December 1234, sensing he was soon to have his ideas tested in practice; he summoned his cardinals to his bedside. He urged them, when he was gone, to select 'a worthy successor to the Chair of Peter'. They in turn urged to save his soul and the church's honor by withdrawing his heretical views about the beatific vision. He died the next day. A Bull was subsequently published in his name, revoking all he had said and done that conflicted with the church and submitting himself totally to its judgement.

Did the Bull genuinely reflect John's final state of mind? Even there, he maintains that separated souls 'see God the divine essence face to face clearly, so had as the state and condition of a separated soul permits'. Such subtleties seem beyond the scope of a ninety-year-old on the brink of the grave. Pointless, too, in that it was still not acceptable to theologians.

Judged by the church's own teaching, this pope was a heretic, as Adrian VI admitted. He pertinaciously and over a period denied an important article of faith. When challenged, he publicly altered his position, only to leave open a doctrine that was officially closed. He still doubted, therefore was still a heretic. What his final position was is not clear; even if he was responsible for the final Bull, it was still heterodoxy.

His successor, Benedict XII, stood no nonsense on the matter. On 29 January 1336, in a public consistory, he said that after death the saints enjoy the beatific vision without any delay. Anyone holding a contrary opinion was to be punished as a heretic.

Even after he left the scene, John XXII remained a controversial figure. He, the scourge of heretics, was proclaimed a heretic himself. He had handed over to the Inquisition for burning a large number of holy Franciscans – they eventually numbered 114 – whose only crime was to say that Jesus and his disciples lived a life of poverty.

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

For the final irony is this: when he died, the treasury which was empty when he took over was overflowing. The Florentine bankers called in to deal with the hoard were astounded. Never had they seen anything remotely like it. They counted 25 million gold florins, and there was an equivalent amount in gems and precious objects.

The real heresy of John XXII, Christ's vicar and successor to St Peter, was that he burned the poorest of Christ's poor and died the richest man in the world.

The Pope Who Rewrote the Bible

When Gregory XIII became pope in the year 1572, the Franciscan Cardinal Montalto retired from public life. His retainers passed it around that his Eminence had one foot in the grave already and wanted no more life than to prepare for death. At the rare meetings of the Sacred College which he was obliged to attend, he coughed continuously as if he were in the final stages of consumption. To whatever was proposed he meekly bowed his big tonsured head in assent. He was too weak to argue. When his colleagues protested that he was far too young to die, Felice Peretti da Montalto shrugged sadly and added eight years to his age in an effort to convince them of his imminent decease. An English visitor to Rome chanced to catch a rare glimpse of his Eminence bent over his fire and wrote home about this 'most crouching, humble cardinal that was ever lodged in an oven'.



Pope Gregory died in 1585, Montalto appeared at the conclave, hollow-cheeked, dull-eyed, with wrinkles carefully applied. His gait was snail-like, his voice scarcely audible. He walked on crutches, and so round-shouldered was he that his head nearly touched the ground. It was evident to all forty-two cardinal-electors as they cast their votes that Montalto was perfect for the papacy. They were immediately undeceived. As soon as Montalto won the vote, according to his biographer Leti, he straightened up, threw his crutches away with a cry, 'Now I am Caesar,' before intoning the *Te Deum* with a voice of thunder.

In five years *Sixtus V* got through fifty years' work. He had teams of men laboring day and night to put the dome on St Peter's. He had the obelisk moved, inch by inch, by hundreds of workmen and mules, to its present central position in the piazza. He built the Vatican Library. He constructed an aqueduct over valleys and hills to bring water twenty miles into Rome. He well earned his nickname, 'The Consecrated Whirlwind'.

Allied to titanic energy was a fierce and clamorous egotism. He asserted his temporal jurisdiction over all kings and princes. When the Jesuit, Robert Bellarmine, the stoutest champion of the papacy since Aquinas, suggested in his book of *Controversies* that the pope only had indirect jurisdiction over temporal rulers, Sixtus resolved to censure him. He could for any reason, he said, and *whenever he pleased*, appoint or dismiss *anyone*, emperors included. He also disapproved of the theologian Vittorio for daring to write that it was lawful to disobey unjust orders of a pope. Yes, he Sixtus, pontiff, would ban the books of both these renegades.

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

The cardinals of the Congregation of the Index were too terrified to tell his Holiness that these eminent authors based their views on the works of countless saints and scholars. Count Olivares, the Spanish ambassador to Rome, wrote to his master Philip II that the cardinals stayed silent ‘for fear Sixtus might give them a taste of his sharp temper and perhaps put the saints themselves on the Index’.

Sixtus was particularly ungracious towards Bellarmine. The Jesuit had gallantly co-operated with him on editing the works of St Ambrose. It cannot have been easy. At every point, Sixtus has overruled his judgement. Afterwards, the pope made the order that his was now the standard text. It was and it remains the most unreliable in existence.

The same high-handed approach he adopted to the Bible. The results were devastating.

The Latin version of the Bible, the Vulgate, was the work of St Jerome in the fourth century. By the Middle Ages it had pride and place. By then, many false readings had crept in, owing to sleepy copyists. With printing, editions multiplied, as did the errors. At the Reformation Protestants had their own versions of the Bible; it was imperative for Catholics to have a reliable text of the Vulgate in all disputes.

The Council of Trent in 1546 had called the Vulgate the church’s authentic version of the Bible. It alone to be used in lectures, disputations, sermons. ‘Authentic’ means that Catholics can be sure it is free from doctrinal and moral error and substantially faithful to the originals. When the fathers of Trent commissioned a new edition of the Vulgate, they had no idea of the size of the task. Eleven popes lived and died, and nothing happened. Until Sixtus V.

Three years into his pontificate, at the end of 1588, the scholars he had appointed to edit the Vulgate presented him with their final text. There was too much scholarship in it for the pope’s liking; and they had put in too many variant readings. He shouted the president of the commission, Cardinal Carafa, out of his room, screaming he could do far better on his own. This astounding claim he set about trying to prove. In a 300-word sentence, he declared in a Bull that he, the pope, was the only proper person to decide the question of an authentic Bible for the church.

Hour after hour he labored, and night after night, for he was an insomniac. He had only one full-time secretary, who was almost driven to the grave. In the main, Sixtus kept to the Louvain text which he was familiar with. It was not particularly scholarly. Where it was obscure, he did not mind adding phrases and sentences to clarify. Often he translated according to whim. Another of his idiosyncrasies was to alter the references. A system of chapter and verse had been worked out in 1555 by Robert Stephanus. It was not perfect but it was convenient and was universally used. Sixtus discarded it in favor of his own scheme. All previous Bibles became instantly obsolete; all books in the schools, with their armories of texts, had to be reprinted/ apart from changing the titles of the Psalms which were considered by many to be inspired, he omitted, probably through carelessness, entire verses.

After only eighteen months, his work was done. In 1590, the first folio copies appeared. ‘Splendid,’ he muttered, admiring the beautiful binding, until on glance at the text revealed many

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

misprints. Then more and more. The printers, too, had been expected to operate, night and day, in whirlwind fashion.

So as not to waste time, Sixtus started patching things up on his own. He wrote corrections in ink on tiny bits of paper – squats, oblongs, triangles – and pasted them over the printer's errors. It took him six months, and he botched a lot of it. His Bull, *Aeternus Ille*, was long ready. Never was there a more authoritative document:

By the fullness of Apostolical power, We decree and declare this edition ... approved by the authority given Us by the Lord, is to be received and held as true, lawful, authentic and unquestioned in all public and private discussions, readings, preachings and explanations.

No printer, editor, bookseller was allowed to deviate by one jot from this final and authentic version of the Latin Bible. Anyone contravening the Bull was to be excommunicated, and only the pope could absolve him. Temporal punishments were threatened, too.

In mid-April copies were at last delivered to cardinals and ambassadors. They inspected it, boggle-eyed. Four months later, on 27 August, the bells of the Capitol announced the pope was dead. That night a storm arose so fierce it was as though Sixtus' departing spirit had whipped up the elements into a frenzy. Rome went wild with delight, but none was so elated as his enemies in the Sacred College.

The next pope died after a twelve-day pontificate. Gregory XIV (1590-1) was left to limit the damage. But how? A Bible had been imposed with the plentitude of papal power, complete with the trimmings of excommunication, on the whole church – and it was riddled with errors. The academic world was in turmoil; Protestants were deriving enormous pleasure and amusement from the predicament of the Roman church.

On 11 November 1590, Bellarmine returned to Rome from a mission abroad. Personally relieved that Sixtus, who had wanted him on the Index, was dead, he feared for the prestige of the papacy. He suggested to the new pope how he might deal with this dilemma. In his *Autobiography* he was to tell all:

Some men, whose opinions had great weight, held that it should be publicly prohibited. I did not think so, as I showed the Holy Father that, instead of forbidding the edition of the Bible in question, it would be better to correct it in such manner that it would be published without detriment to the honor of Pope Sixtus. This result could be achieved by removing inadvisable changes as quickly as possible, and then issuing the volume with Sixtus' name upon it, and a preface stating that owing to haste some errors crept into the first edition through the fault of printers and other persons.

In brief, Bellarmine advised the pope to lie. Some of his admirers have disputed this. Their task is formidable.

The options were plain: admit publicly that a pope had erred on a critical matter of the Bible or engage in a cover-up whose outcome was unpredictable. Bellarmine proposed the latter.

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

He may have been tempted to take this line because it was a selfless thing to do: he was defending the honor of a man who had impugned his own. He may have also have meant to include Sixtus in that vague reference to the fault of printers 'and other persons'. Yet could any reader have possibly guessed that the pope was one of the other persons? Besides, the only damaging errors were the pope's, not the printers.

The deceit did not stop there.

A thorough overhaul of Sixtus' Bible would take years. Years they did not have. A small band of scholars, including Bellarmine, went to work in a country house on a slope of the Sabine Hills eighteen miles from Rome. They did a remarkable job, completing their revision in mid-June 1591. The problem now was how to present it to the world. Bellarmine, asked by a new pontiff, developed a cover-up.

The new version should be printed at once. Sixtus' version was bound to fall in the hands of heretics. They would point to the changes, omissions, mistranslations and say: 'Look, popes think nothing of corrupting Bible texts to suit their own purposes.' With the new text should go a preface saying Sixtus had published a Bible revised according to his orders but, on examining it, he had discovered that many errors had crept into it owing to unseemly haste. This was not so unusual in first editions. Sixtus, therefore, decided that the work must be done all over again. At his death, his successors were keen to carry out his wishes. Hence the new edition.

This was a far cry from the truth. The only really disturbing errors were those of which Sixtus was unaware: his own. He never had the slightest intention of revising his own work, only that of the printers. The decision to revise and republish was taken after his death.

Uppermost in Bellarmine's mind was this: popes must never be seen to condemn the solemn decrees of their predecessors. That would reflect badly on papal authority itself. On the other hand, respect, was also due to the Bible; that, like the papacy, was inerrant. Out of the need to reconcile the irreconcilable came the cover-up.

Bellarmino suggested that the new version should not be the only one allowed. It had been done in a hurry and there were, no doubt, errors in it that time would reveal. Besides, he added, 'though the Pope has given us our commission, he could not give us the assistance of the Holy Spirit which is his exclusive prerogative'. There was in Bellarmine's mind, for all its greatness and subtlety, an almost childish strain when it came to the papacy. He did not care to explain what happened to the assistance of the Holy Spirit while Pope Sixtus was working on the Vulgate.

The Bible was ready for publication at the end of 1592, and Clement VIII agreed to it going out under the sole name of Sixtus. In *The Church and the Papacy* (1944), Jalland says, tongue in cheek, that this affair:

... serves to provide unique documentary evidence of the possibility that even the Roman See can change its mind. Yet- the fact has subsequently been obscured, for when the new edition appeared in 1592 it was boldly and somewhat disingenuously presented to the world as the 'Sixtine' Bible. If the name of Clement was later introduced, it scarcely served to atone for the strange feat of literary

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

dishonesty, nor to conceal the truth that the Roman See had so far yielded to popular clamor as to treat one of its earlier decisions as reversible.

After the lies, one problem remained: how to get back copies of the real Sixtus Bible. Bellarmine advised the pope to buy them back, regardless of cost, which was likely to be high. Not only were they magnificently produced, but a half-wit would see their curio value.

Instructions went out to the Inquisition in Venice and to the Jesuit General to scour printing houses and private homes, especially in Germany, to save the honor of the papacy. The search had elements of farce. At a time when Protestants were distributing free Bibles, the Catholic church was desperately trying to buy some back.

How many copies were recovered is not known, but at the most ten. One copy found its way into the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Its first librarian, Dr Thomas James, treated it like manna from heaven. In 1611 he wrote a book contrasting the two Bibles of Sixtus and Sixtus-Clement. He found 'that the two popes did notoriously differ amongst themselves, not only in the number of the verses [the latter version went back to Stephanus' system of reference] but in the body of the text and in the Prefaces and Bulls themselves'.

James claimed to see a remarkable thing: two popes warring in open contradiction to each other. 'In this war, their Head hath been so soiled and their Church so deadly wounded that all the balme in Gilead will not cure them. We have here one Pope against another, Sixtus against Clement, Clement against Sixtus, disputing, writing and fighting about the Jerome Bible.' The Bible, as far as Catholics were concerned, said James, was a wax nose which popes bent into whatever shape suited them. 'If the Pope said what was white and black and black and white no Catholic dared disagee.'

It was good polemics, and Sixtus thoroughly deserved it. But even Dr James did not find more than one or two fundamental differences between two popes or any real attempt by either to deceive the reader. Enormous stupidity was present but precious little malice.

What the affair revealed was something quite different.

In any other institution, mistakes such as those made by Sixtus would have been a mere passing embarrassment easily laughed off and soon forgotten. Only in the Roman church it provoked what, in Bellarmine's view, was the greatest crisis of the Reformation. Reacting to the crisis, a man of Bellarmine's integrity felt compelled to tell lies and half-truths which more than one pope swallowed with relief. If a saintly person like Bellarmine was prepared to lie for the papacy, what will others not do? What have others not done? What are others not doing?

Bellarmino, selfless and poor, emerges as the sad victim of the papacy which he gave his life to defend. So large did it figure in his mind that in him Dr James's jibe was verified to the letter. He did, to please the pope, say that black was white and white black in a most dangerous area: ethics. He states in his book on the Roman pontiff that whatever the pope commands, however evil or ridiculous, has to be obeyed, as if it is virtue itself. Whatever the pope does, even when he deposes an emperor on the most

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

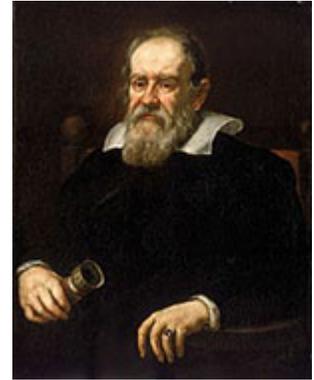
frivolous pretext, has to be accepted by Catholics who henceforward have to obey the pope and not the emperor.

The affair of the pope who rewrote the Bible proves once more that the teaching that the pope cannot err creates its own version of history and leads even saintly men to lie on its behalf. But Bellarmine is chiefly remembered today not because he covered up for the pope, but because he helped ruin the career of a layman – one of the most famous who ever lived.

The Greatest Scandal in Christendom

Galileo was old now, in his mid-seventies, and completely blind. In the summer of 1640, he knew that his days were numbered.

Why did they go on persecuting him? In the village, there were still paid informers who told the Inquisition everything about him. They intercepted his mail, wrote memos on every visitor he received. His Holiness Urban VIII would never forgive him, he knew that. When he applied to Rome for permission to go into Florence for medical treatment, the Inquisition had replied: ‘Sanctissimus’ [the Most Holy] refused to grant the request and ordered the said gentleman should be warned to desist from handing in supplications or he will be taken back to the gaols of the Holy Office.’ That hurt the ‘said gentleman’, not only because he had always thought of the pope as a friend but also because the reply came on the day that his daughter, aged thirty-three, died of melancholy at her father’s fate.



Ah, but it was good to be in his beloved villa of *Il Gioiello* (The Gem) with all its familiar sounds and smells, and its sights on parade before his inner eyes. Walking out in the cool of evening, he could vividly imagine Florence, city of lights, beneath his villa at *Arcetri*, the Babel-high, red-brick, flower-like cupola of the cathedral beneath Giotto’s belfry, the *Palazzo Vecchio* with its soaring tower, the broad sweep of the River Arno. All around him, in the still air, he could hear the cicadas and smell the ash-grey olive trees and vines. Once, he had been an expert at grafting vines; the wine he drank was always the product of his own hands.

But more precious than this Tuscan villa, or Florence itself set in a gentle landscape, was the sky above: moon and stars. Was it pride on his part to feel that these celestial forms were more his than most men’s, more his than even *Il Gioiello*?

Though blind as Homer, he kept on dictating his scientific works to his secretary. They were, curiously, among the best. The Inquisition had forbidden him to publish anything new or to reissue his old works. Banned for life, they said. But only in Italy, and not forever. Inquisitors, though they disagreed, were not God.

Besides, though he was blind now, who could take from him the memory of what his eyes had seen? Those eyes of his had seen things hidden since the beginning of the world. They had opened up

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

new Americas in the skies, and, one day, he never doubted it, his name would be as famous as – no, *more* famous than Columbus.

Galileo Galilei had been born in the year 1564, in the year Michelangelo died. His father Vincenzo, a cloth-merchant had hailed from Florence, but his first child was born in Pisa. Galileo started in university as a medical student but soon dropped out. His burning interest was mathematics, pure and applied. Mathematics, he was to say, provided him with wings to soar above the world and see the stars. In a humbler vein, it made him an inventor. He fashioned an instrument for finding the center of gravity of bodies of varying shapes.

In 1589 he became professor of mathematics in Pisa. He did not get on well with his colleagues; he was constantly complaining about his salary and conditions of work. The more useless the professors, he said, the higher their salaries. He switched to Padua where pay was slightly better. He still had to take students to cover his expenses. There he stayed for eighteen years.

In 1609 he was forty-five years old, with only one small publication to his name. A year later, as a result of a pamphlet he wrote, he became one of the most famous men in the world. Kepler praised his intellectual courage and called him the greatest philosopher of his time.

His change of fortune began with a piece of luck fertilized by genius. He heard of an optical device, a spyglass or *occhiale*, invented by a Dutchman. Instantly, he decided to make his own, basing it on the theory of refraction. He took a hollow tube of lead and fitted glass lenses at each end. The lenses were plain on one side and while on the other they were convex and concave. He put his eye to the concave lens and was amazed to find the object he was looking at three times nearer and nine times larger. Being an expert in grinding lenses, he made another spyglass which increased the object sixty times. Finally, after great effort and expense, he made an object thirty times nearer and enlarged by a thousand times.

He instantly applied the invention to a military purpose. In a public ceremony, he handed over a telescope to the Doge of Venice in the presence of the Senate. The Republic was delighted to have an instrument that could detect hostile armies and navies long before they were visible to the naked eye. They confirmed his professorship for life and doubled his salary in exchange for an instrument that, from now on, any craftsman could make.

Next, Galileo turned his telescope to the night sky. That was the moment when the whole history of man was altered. The scientific revolution was born.

The first thing he focused on was the moon. Those were more than shadows on the surface, he realized; they were mountains. He soon found out how to gauge their heights from the length of their shadows. He also saw vast plains he took for oceans and which have been called ever since the Seas of the Moon.

In a sensational extrapolation, he presumed that to an observer on the moon the earth would look exactly as the moon looked to an observer on earth. He even guessed that from the moon the earth would be divided up into dark zones (sea) and light zones (land). In a moment of instinctive poetry, he

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

spoke of earthshine. ‘the old moon in the new moon’s arms’, namely, sunlight reflected from the earth to the moon and back. He was able to work out why irregular surfaces reflect more light than smooth surfaces and why the edge of the moon looks smooth to the naked eye when it was not the perfect sphere it once appeared to be.

In a second spectacular moment of revelation, Galileo grasped that ‘scientists’ had been wrong for over two thousand years. Aristotle; followed by scholastics like Aquinas, took it for granted that the celestial world was totally different from the terrestrial. Up here and out there, no change, no decay, only eternal abiding. This implied a different kind of matter from “down below’ on earth. But through his telescope the moon looked suspiciously like earth. What if the entire creation was one, a true ... universe? What if the earth was not special but simply one lump of matter among other lumps? And if the moon, so earth-like, can revolve without harm around the earth, why cannot the earth itself revolve? What if the entire picture of creation conceived by the monk Copernicus was real and no mere mathematical hypothesis?

Over ten years before, Galileo had written to Kepler that he felt Copernicus was right. The earth was not static; it went round the sun. But what if now he could set about making this conviction plausible? Not merely plausible but a fact?

From the moment Galileo glanced at the moon through arranged pieces of glass, the earth experienced its greatest quake. It ceased to be a center, *the* center of the universe. And what of man? If he no longer stood on this central immobile plank of earth, what should be said of *him*? Even the mind of genius dared not look too hard at first for fear of shaking the foundations of his faith, his faith in the Bible and in the church.

Question followed question and he gave what answers he could. But he was quick to grasp that what mattered most was not that he had enlarged the perception of the universe a hundred or a thousand times. What kept ringing in his head, intoxicating him, was the thought that no one had ever seen *this way* before.

To his dismay, when he asked Aristotelians to look through his telescope to check his findings many refused. They knew already, they said, from calculations they had made on paper and by comparing texts that the moon is a smooth and polished surface. How could a tube with glass at the ends disprove Aristotle and an interpretation of Scripture that was centuries old? Of the few who dared take a peep, most suggested on all seriousness that what they were seeing was in the lenses, not in the stars. Galileo joked that, when he died, what he saw they, too, would see on their way to heaven.

Approaching fifty, with twenty penurious years behind him, he was at last a free man. *Nuncius Sididereus*, his book, known as the *Messenger* [or *Message*] *from the Stars*, was an instant success.

At this time, Galileo had many clerical friends – indeed, supporters in Rome itself, like the eminent Jesuit mathematician Clavius. Clavius confirmed his discoveries and informed an aged Cardinal Bellarmine. This inspired Galileo to visit Rome on the spring of 1611. The Jesuit cardinal was friendly, as

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

was Cardinal Barberini. Both of them warned him to express his ideas as hypotheses, to avoid trouble with theologians. He was made a member of the prestigious Lyncean Academy who first named his instrument a 'telescope'.

He returned to Florence naïvely convinced he had made lasting and influential friends in the Eternal City. Maybe that is why he became more outspoken. He attacked Aristotelians unmercifully, writing in Italian so as to appeal above the heads of dry academics to the general public.

In spite of his best intentions, he was raising questions of the relation between science and revelation, the Copernican system and the Bible. Were they compatible? In his defense, he quoted Cardinal Baronius' witticism: 'The aim of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how to go to heaven, not how heaven goes.' The Bible was not a scientific text, and there was no need to take its 'scientific statements' literally. There are many literary forms in the Scriptures. Most tellingly, if scientific theory is bad science, good science will correct it. It presents no challenge to faith. On the contrary, nature and the Bible are two divine texts that cannot contradict one another.

His arguments would convince churchmen a couple of centuries later; they left contemporary clerics cold. Galileo seemed to be contradicting the plain sense of the Scripture. In putting forward the Copernican system as more than a mathematical theory, he had trespassed on their domain. A matter for the Inquisition, perhaps? The Bishop of Fiesole called out for Copernicus to be gaoled immediately. His Lordship was dismayed to be told that a heretical monk had been dead for seventy years. Ominously, one of Galileo's books did find its way into the dreaded *Casa Santa* of the Holy Office

He had been warned that Bellarmine had never wavered in his view that Copernicus' system was contrary to Scripture if taken as a scientific fact. None the less, Galileo went to Rome and proceeded to demolish anyone who cast doubts on Copernicus. But even he, so naïve in the ways of the world, was beginning to catch a whiff of gunpowder.

A priest sympathizer sent him a copy of a letter he had received from Bellarmine. According to the cardinal, when the fathers and all modern scripture scholars analyze the relevant Bible passages:

... all see in interpreting them literally as teaching that the sun is in the heavens and revolves around the Earth with immense speed and the Earth is very distant from the heavens, at the center of the universe, and motionless. Consider, then, in your prudence, whether the Church can tolerate that the Scriptures should be interpreted in a manner contrary to that of the holy Fathers and of all modern commentators, both Latin and Greek. ... Scripture says, 'The sun also riseth and the sun *goeth down*'.

Galileo read it a hundred times. He still could not believe it. Old Bellarmine was a good and wise man. How could he take so childish a review of the Old Testament? His Eminence went on to say that anyone, simply by consulting his senses, could know for sure that the earth is motionless. Did he expect to feel dizzy if the world was going round the sun? If he were on the moon, would he expect to *feel* it moving? Great theologian he might be, but Bellarmine was as clueless about astronomy as those who seriously said that if the earth moved round the sun all the towers in Italy would fall down. 'Their senses told them' everything in the universe was moving *except the earth!*

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

Galileo became really worried. His Eminence was telling him not to meddle with scripture while he was pontificating on science without any training at all. He knew now that Bellarmine would not scruple to silence him by summoning him before the Inquisition.

That is what happened. Pope Paul V, pious, fat, short-sighted, with a small beard and pointed moustache, known to everyone as a philistine, handed over his case to the Congregation of the Index. A decision was given in March 1616.

The view that the sun is the immovable center of the universe was judged to be ‘foolish and absurd, philosophically false and formally heretical’. The opinion that the earth is not the center but revolves and rotates was judged at least ‘erroneous in faith’.

Not Galileo but his Copernican beliefs were censured. None the less, the pope instructed Bellarmine to tell Galileo to abandon his opinion. If not, he had to give an undertaking not to teach or defend his views nor even discuss them. Otherwise, he would be put in prison.

Though convinced of his own orthodoxy, Galileo gave the guarantees. He merely asked Bellarmine to write him a letter, which he did on 26 May 1616. The cardinal witnessed to the fact that he had not been compelled to recant or to undergo any penance. Nor was he forced to stop his researches, even into astronomy. He was simply told not to hold or teach *as if it were true* the system of Copernicus. The latter was put on the Index where he remained until 1822

Galileo, in ill-health, was glad the ordeal was over. What upset was that ‘minds created free by God are compelled to submit slavishly to an outside will’. He was *the* expert on astronomy and he was being judged by persons without any competence. The pope had personally endorsed Bellarmine’s view that to say the earth revolves is against the infallible teaching of the church. If the earth moves, heaven would not be ‘up there’ or hell ‘down there’. The whole teaching on the Last Things would have to be revised. As one papal aide said, with a sigh: Now we are ‘safely back on solid earth and we do not have to fly with it as so many ants crawling around a balloon’.

A few tranquil years passed and Galileo wrote *Il Saggiatore* (The Assayer). It was 1623. The same year, his ‘friend’, fifty-five-year-old Cardinal Barberini, became Pope Urban VIII. In the eleven days of voting, there was a heatwave; malaria whipped through the conclave. Eight cardinals and forty aides died. Urban had contracted malaria but survived. To him, Galileo dedicated his new book.

The pope appreciated the compliment. When, in the following year, Galileo, aged sixty, went to Rome, he presented his Holiness with a microscope. Urban peered down it and shook his head in wonderment. In gratitude, he gave the great scientist several Agnus Deis against acts of God and, of more value, advice against the acts of man. What he said was this: ‘You may have irrefutable proof of the earth’s motion. This does not prove the earth actually moves.’ Galileo’s eyes widened. ‘God is above human reason; and what seems perfectly reasonable to men may prove folly to God.’ Urban went on to say that he, as pope, was responsible for the salvation of souls. Sometimes scientific discussion imperils souls. The Copernican system, unless taken as a pure mathematical device, might cast doubt on Scripture. Should that happen, he would have to take steps to stamp it out.

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

The pope's view on God and the relation between science and religion were so absurd that Galileo did not take in the excellent advice he was being given at the top level. In fact it was good of Urban to take time off from his great building projects: the Barberini palaces for which he cannibalized the Colosseum, the Bernini colonnade enclosing the piazza of St Peter's, the *baldacchino* under Michelangelo's dome for which he filched the bronze from the Pantheon. The Romans savagely said: 'What the Barbarians did not do, the Barberini did.'

Somewhat mystified, Galileo returned to Florence where he was soon at work on *The System of the World*. Since he cast it in the form of a Platonic dialogue, he no doubt thought this would enable him to hide his own convictions, while pasting the opposition. When it was finished in the year 1630, all that remained was to get a license to publish and, as a precaution, a papal *Imprimatur*.

In good heart, he went back to Rome, where once more Urban received him warmly. The pope re-emphasized the need to make everyone aware of the hypothetical nature of his opinions. As regards the book, Galileo ought perhaps to entitle it Dialogue of the Two Chief Systems. Yes, Yes, the pope promised, he would write a preface himself, stressing the tentative nature of the enterprise.

When, the censors received their copy, they were disturbed by its contents. But his Holiness had given the book his approval, had he not? And was not he going to write the preface?

There were unfavorable delays in publication, so that Galileo had it printed in Florence in February 1632. It created a sensation. The arguments for the earth moving were set out masterfully. The Aristotelian view in the dialogue was put in the mouth of *Simplicius*, a half-wit, whose ideas corresponded exactly with the pope's as he had expressed them in that interview with the author a few years before.

When Urban got wind of this seemingly studied insult, he was furious. He told the Holy Office to take over and order the author to report to Rome at once. When Galileo, nearing seventy, wrote back pleading, honestly, ill-health, Urban bade him come freely or in chains.

When he arrived in Rome after twenty-three days on the road, he had to wait two months for his ordeal to begin. Time passed slowly. Two nights in succession, he was heard crying out with the pain of his sciatica.

His childlikeness never left him. He actually expected to be allowed to defend himself, even to discuss sensibly with the inquisitors, as though these clerical gentlemen were interested in finding out the truth. In fact they in no way resembled his fellow-professors with whom he had argued in the salons of rich Roman ladies. He did have a kind of insurance policy in his pocket. For years, he had kept Bellarmine's letter under lock and key for just such an emergency as this.

When the trial began in April 1633 he was moved from the Tuscan embassy into the *Casa* of the Holy Office. The hearing was held in the upper room of a Dominican convent. He was immediately told that the Inquisition was not there to listen to him but to judge him. Evidence he was not allowed to see, witnesses he was not allowed to hear.

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

His chief offense was in violating the injunction of 1616, namely, not to discuss or write about the Copernican system. He begged their Eminences' pardon but he had a letter from the late Cardinal Bellarmine he was only forbidden to hold Copernicus' views as if they were a true picture of the world. This he had never done. He had merely discussed it and, as his recent book showed, in a hypothetical way. He pointed out that the dialogue ended without conclusions.

The inquisitors countered his letter with an unsigned unofficial minute found in their files, dated 1616, in which he was forbidden even to discuss Copernicus' theories. Galileo was never shown this document. Further, their Eminences argued, in spite of the dialogue form of his recent book, no reader could possibly doubt his own position, and this was contrary to the faith of the church. He was guilty of contumacy and heresy. He could expect leniency only if he submitted unconditionally and declared his appreciation of the Inquisition's kindness towards him.

After four sessions, the verdict was given in late June 1633. The pope had intervened to say that his old friend was to be tortured if he did not conform:

The said Galileo [is] ... in the judgement of the Holy Office vehemently suspected of heresy, namely, of having believed and held the doctrine which is false and contrary to the Sacred and Divine Scriptures, that the sun is the center of the world and does not move from east to west and that the earth moves and is not the center of the world. ...

His books were burned; he was to be imprisoned by the Inquisition; he was required to say the seven penitential Psalms each week for three years. The document was signed by seven cardinal judges of the Holy Office.

Galileo had made up his mind to acquiesce but, for his honor's sake, he asked for two of the charges to be withdrawn. He wanted it stated that he had not denied the Catholic faith, nor had he knowingly contradicted a previous decision of the Holy Office. The judges accepted these marginal alterations. Galileo had conceded that he was wrong about astronomy and they were right.

So, on that Wednesday in late June, Galileo knelt on the cool stone floor of the Dominican convent of Santa Maria sopra Minerva to make his confession:

'I Galileo, son of the late Vincenzo Galilei, Florentine, aged seventy years ... must altogether abandon the false opinion that the sun is the center of the world and immobile.'

Outwardly, by denying his deepest convictions, he perjured himself. In his heart, at least, he must have said of the earth: 'All the same, it does move', *'Eppur si muove'*.

When Galileo touched the Gospels and admitted his 'heretical depravity' in the heart of Rome, it was a solemn moment in the history of the church. Only the trial of Jesus before Pilate can surpass it in gravity.

The Founder of Modern Science, at the behest of the Roman Inquisition, was forced to affirm, in accordance with the Catholic faith, that the earth is the motionless center of the universe. A scholar

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

who, in any list of the world's great men, would figure in the first twenty, was condemned by a group of clerics, none of whom would figure in the first million.

With Copernicus on the index and Galileo condemned by the Inquisition, Catholic astronomers now had to choose between being good Catholics and being good members of their profession. By all the normal criteria, the immobility of the earth was *Catholic doctrine*. It was held by every pope, bishop and theologian for centuries. Nor was it merely implicit. When the teaching was tested, when Copernicus and Galileo cast doubt upon it, the reigning pope and popes for centuries afterwards explicitly confirmed it with the plentitude of their power. And they were wrong. The earth does move, however many popes denied it, saying it contradicts Scripture and the faith. If Catholics today claim this was never really Catholic doctrine, can one ever be sure of *any* Catholic doctrine.

In 1686, Newton's law of gravitation made it impossible for any scientist to believe that the huge sun revolved around a midget earth as its center. In the year 1725 this theoretical proof was confirmed by Bradley's meticulous observation. It took another hundred years before Copernicus was removed from the Index. In the early 1980s, John Paul II was heard to say something about 'rehabilitating Galileo'; though to date nothing has come of it. After three and a half centuries, Rome is in no hurry to apologize.

Rome refused to publish the documents on the Galileo affair. Then Napoleon, in a huge operation, removed the Vatican archives to Paris. When they were eventually returned, the documents relating to the affair were missing. The lost strenuous investigations failed to find them. Critics of the church presumed the great man had been tortured. Without any warning or any explanation, the documents resurfaced. It was clear from them that Galileo had been threatened but not tortured. Nor was his imprisonment so severe. After ten days of the trial, he was allowed to return to a house belonging to the de' Medici. He was eventually to retire to his own villa at Arcetri. This was mild treatment considering that Urban VII condemned bigamists to the galleys for life.

What wounded Galileo most was the disgrace. It had been visited on him for no reason he could understand. He thought of himself as a devoted Catholic. How could anyone insist on taking Genesis literally when there were overwhelming reasons for it being a myth! He was convinced that scientific problems could not be solved by a clerical police force. Ranged against him, he saw only ignorance, malice and impiety posing as Christian faith and virtue. Small-minded Vatican clerics had humiliated him but they could not stop the progress of science. His was the classic case of truth being crushed by power, genius being silenced by petty bureaucracy. It showed Rome's fear and hatred of the enquiring mind which was to be repeated time after time in the centuries ahead. The church's backward march into the future meant that its war with science and progress was to go on and on. It warred against liberty and the democratic process at and after the French Revolution. It made war on Darwin and Freud, on biblical scholarship, on attempts to understand the world on its own terms, free from divine 'interventions from outside'. Today, it wages war against birth control and the equality of women. On each and every occasion, the Catholic Church at the highest level refers to the Bible and natural law as it tries, with the best intentions, to halt the forward march of the world. It is a melancholy fact that it would be hard to find in the last four centuries one instance in which Rome greeted with unqualified joy

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

a decisive advance of the human spirit. Any theologian who is censured today can at least take comfort in the fact that he is not treated as harshly as the Father of Modern Science.

After eight years of house arrest, Galileo Galilei died in January 1642, the year of Newton's birth. The Grand Duke of Florence wanted to erect a monument over his grave in the church of Santa Croce, next to the grave of Michelangelo. Pope Urban VIII was not yet finished with his friend. He warned the duke that Galileo had pertinaciously held a doctrine opposed to the Scriptures. He repeated that it is against the faith to say the earth moves. He would therefore take any such memorial as a personal insult to his authority. So it was that the body of the greatest scientist of his age was interred for almost a hundred years in the cellar of the bell tower in Santa Croce.

Urban, wrong on almost everything, was at least right in the reason he gave for refusing a decent exequies: Galileo by his sins had given rise to 'the greatest scandal in Christendom'.

=====

Note: *In 1992, Pope John Paul II acknowledged that that the church made a mistake when it condemned Galileo for maintaining that the Earth revolved around the sun. At that time the church officially conceded that the Earth was not stationary. The pope also said that theologians should keep informed on scientific advances to determine if there would be cause for introducing changes in their teaching.*

=====

Clement XI's Great Mistake

Clement XI held court in his palace on Monte Cavallo. It was cooler there than in the Vatican, the air less full of pestilence. On Wednesday of Holy Week in the year 1715, he journeyed in the state to St Peter's.

Next day, after mass in St Peter's, Clement ascended his *sedia* and was carried on to the loggia. The crowd filled the piazza of St Peter's and stretched down every side-street. As soon as he appeared, kettle drums sounded, trumpets blew. In the deep silence that followed, a cardinal read the Holy Thursday Bull of excommunication against all heretics, schismatics, pagans, Mediterranean pirates and all who did not render the Holy Father obedience or pay him their taxes when due.



This Bull, *In Coena Domini*, dated back in broad outline to 1372. Pius V in 1568 said it was to remain an eternal law in Christendom, and it was confirmed by pope after pope until it was finally dropped without explanation in the reign of Clement XIV (1769-74). Some explanation would have been welcome, since the Bull expressed the most full-blown of all papal heresies: that the pope has dominion over the entire Christian world, religious *and* secular. This belief has never been explicitly abandoned by the Vatican.

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

During the reading of the Bull, the pope, his long lean close-shaven face full of melancholy, held a lighted torch in his hand. When the reading was over, his eight bearers lifted the pontiff up in his chair and, with a loud voice, he pronounced excommunication on practically the entire world before tossing his torch over the balcony. It sparked and looped in the air before hitting the crowd below, a sign of the church's vengeance on her enemies.

Clement XI was an exemplary thunderer. Yet his endless anathemas, which his contemporaries took for great holiness, hid a dreadful insecurity. On his election fifteen years before on 20 November 1700, *Gian Francisco Albani* was fifty-one years old. Ordained but two years and feeling unequal to the task, he refused the crown at first. He only yielded when four learned religious told him that not to accept the unanimous decision of conclave would be to resist the manifest will of God. Oddly, he accepted *their* decision immediately.

Clement seemed a good choice for pontiff: a disciplinarian, learned, chaste, he slept and ate little, he even said mass daily – which, in a pope, was unusual. But – a further clue to an essential weakness – he also made daily confession of his sins. He was a small scrupulous world of personal piety. In his constitution *Unigenitus* of 1713, for instance, this chronically insecure pontiff, after consulting two cardinal of like mind, roundly condemned *Jansenism* in France. Some of his condemnations seemed to be sensible; others were to cause the years ahead laughter and embarrassment.

'The reading of the Holy Scriptures is for all men.' Condemned. The banning of God's word, at first surprising, was consistent with the Catholic approach since the Reformation. Some people were reading the Bible unwisely. Instead of helping read it wisely, how much less troublesome to forbid them to read it at all? Besides, this approach made it clear that Rome is superior to the Bible and has God's authority to interpret it.

'Christians are to sanctify the Lord's day with reading godly books, more particularly the Holy Scriptures.' **Condemned.**

'To pull the New Testament out of the hands of Christians is to shut the mouth of Christ against them.' **Condemned.**

'To forbid Christians the reading of the Holy Scripture and especially the Gospel is to forbid the use of the Light by the children of the Light and to punish them with a kind of excommunication.' **Condemned.**

'The fear of an *unjust* excommunication ought not to deter us from doing our duty.' Condemned. According to Voltaire, this meant that God commands us never to do our duty if we fear injustice. Clement's view was that there is no higher duty than obedience to the pope. Obey him and there can be no question of condemnation from God.

Once his vacillating mind was made up, Clement left the church in doubt where he stood.

We declare, condemn and disallow all and each of those Propositions as false, captious, ill-sounding, offensive to pious ears, scandalous, pernicious, rash, injurious against the Church

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

but even against the secular powers, seditious, impious, blasphemous, suspected of heresy and savoring of heresy itself, as also encouraging heretics and heresies and even schisms, erroneous, often condemned, and lastly also heretical, containing divers heresies manifestly tending to innovation.

The pontiff, one gathers, does not much care for these propositions.

Clement; like most pontiffs, assumed that discussion leads not to truth but to further falsehood or, at best, to a little truth and great falsehood. It is not worth the risk. As with Bible-reading, it is better to forbid discussion of important issues altogether. Rome has spoken and Rome knows best.

Two years later, Clement was to publish the Bull *Ex Illa Die*, with far more devastating effects. To understand it, one has to go back over a century and a half.

In 1552, the noblest of Jesuits, Francis Xavier had died on an island off the Chinese mainland. He had worked himself into an early grave. As he lay dying, his only regret was that across that stretch of water a vast land full of pagans who, because they were unbaptized, would roast in hell eternally.

Thirty years later, a fellow Jesuit, Matthew Ricci, entered the Imperial Court at Peking. With his knowledge of mathematics, he was honored as a ‘wise man from the west’, but he was a great and original missionary, too. His method was to become Chinese in order to win the Chinese. He and his Jesuit assistants grasped that it was vital to present a church in sympathy with the traditions of China. Nowhere in the world was there a greater sense of filial piety, of respect for lawful authority and ancestral traditions. When Ricci died after nearly thirty years of labor, he left behind him three hundred churches, one in Peking itself. He was followed by other Jesuits, the only Order entrusted by Gregory XIII with this mission.

In 1631 the Dominicans were allowed to join them. Before long, Father Lorales, OP, accused the Jesuits of gaining converts at the cost of allowing the Chinese to keep their ancestral ‘idolatries’. Jesuits since Ricci had taken a tolerant line with the Chinese rites. They said that reverence done to the wooden tablets of the ancestors, the candles, incense, food and money offered them were simply a matter of courtesy and gratitude. Respect offered by mandarins to Confucius, the Teacher of Wisdom, also seemed harmless, a part of their culture worth preserving.

In 1643, Morales, sent seventeen Jesuit propositions to Rome, asking for them to be condemned. The Inquisition headed as always by Dominicans, supported him; Innocent X agreed that the Jesuits should back off until the matter was examined further. The Jesuit martini argued that the practices were purely civil; condemning them would make conversions impossible. Scholarly investigation showed, he said, that the Chinese had a concept of the one God that, in its purity, had no parallel among pagans.

The controversy raged for many years. The Jesuits on the spot were continually reported to Rome.

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

The year 1692 was momentous. The Jesuits achieved the breakthrough that had eluded them for over a century. Emperor Kang Hi gave them permission to preach the Christian Gospel all over his kingdom and to convert whomsoever they wished. The Jesuits were convinced that Kang Hi, with his immense power and prestige, would be the Chinese Constantine; he was able to bring the whole empire to the feet of Christ. Unfortunately, by this time, the Jesuits were obliged to take orders from vicars apostolic hostile to their mission.

The fated Clement XI ascended the papal throne. For a long time, he could not make up his mind what to do. He put aside one day a week to study the problem of the Chinese rites. He noted the emperor's conviction that there was not the least superstition in them. 'No one', Kang Hi declared, 'really believes the souls of the dead are present in the tablets of their ancestors.'

Clement sent a bishop to Peking as his personal representative to make enquiries. His lordship, very foolishly, condemned the rites in public as idolatrous. The emperor, annoyed and puzzled that Christians were not only divided but hated one another, put the bishop in prison. Clement responded by making him a cardinal just before he died bravely in Macao in 1710. Clement took the imprisonment of his legate as a personal insult. His indecision came to an abrupt end. In his considerable anger, he approved all the decrees of the Inquisition against the Jesuit approach. Now, in the year 1715, every missionary in China had to swear detestation of the Chinese rites and promise never to tolerate them.

This very intolerance, Clement declared, will clear the weeds away and make Chinese soil more fruitful for Christianity. The church had to be Roman, even in Peking.

It was a paper solution, given thousands of miles from the scene of the action. Probably no more disastrous error was ever made by a pontiff. From the publication of *Ex Illa Die*, the Christian mission to China was doomed.

In that same year, 1715, Giuseppe Castiglione, a twenty-seven-year-old Jesuit, was sent by his superior to Peking. He was honored by the Chinese as one of the most wise and revolutionary foreigners ever to go there. His fame was due not to his preaching but to his artistic gifts.

On 16 April 1717, the Nine Highest, counsellors to the emperor, heard of *Ex Illa Die*. They advised his Majesty that, owing to the insults offered China by the Christians and their total lack of respect for the ancestors, all missionaries should be banished, their churches destroyed, their converts forced to renounce their new faith. Reluctantly, the emperor confirmed their sentence. 'What would the pope say', he asked, 'if the Emperor of China told him how he should worship in Rome?' He reserved for himself the right to grant a *piao*, or special license, to Europeans useful to his kingdom.

Among those granted a *piao* was Castiglione, who became official painter to the Imperial Court. Only top painters and watchmakers were allowed to roam freely in the Summer Palace. Castiglione was given a place of his own to paint in. Almost every day the emperor visited him, marveling at the naturalness of his work, especially the horses in which the Jesuit, now named Lang Shining, excelled. Most of his work was done indoors. When he wanted to paint from life, he was escorted by Imperial eunuchs as he walked on tiptoe, like a burglar, out of respect for the emperor. Thus Lang Shinning lived

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

for fifty years. If only in time he had been allowed to teach the gracious Chinese something more than a technique for painting horses.

Two centuries passed. In the year 1939, when the mission to China was dead and buried, the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda declared that times had changed. They had been assured by the Chinese that there was now nothing religious in their rites. Christian converts need not give up reverencing their ancestors.

Without admitting it, Propaganda was reversing Clement's decision. Since papal decisions are never 'reversed', they had to find a pretext for this volte-face. Emperor Kang Hi, the Asian Constantine that might have been, had already made it plain that there was nothing blasphemous or un-Christian in the rites; the Jesuits had been right all along. If Kang Hi had been told by unsympathetic spies that, in Rome, Catholics kissed the pontiff's feet, even the feet of statues, he might have been tempted to think of Catholics as idolaters. Clement's mistake was of that order.

The consequences of *Ex Illa Die* are unfathomable. China might today have been as Catholic as Ireland or Poland.

In view of the church's opposition to birth control, instead of a billion Chinese communists there might now be 2-3 billion Catholics in China. Two out of every three Catholics over the globe might have Chinese faces and speak Chinese. But then the problem of mankind – famine, stress, lack of living-space and natural resources – would long ago have become completely insoluble? By depriving China of Catholicism, Pope Clement XI arguably save the world from catastrophe.

Conclusions

This brief survey shows that all popes are fallible, that many made very bad mistakes, and that several were heretical. They contradicted the teaching of the church, contradicted each other and, not infrequently, contradicted themselves on essential Christian doctrine.

As a result, the tradition was that any pope, including the reigning pontiff, can be as mistaken as anyone else. He has no special grace to prevent him falling into heresy.

Further, there can be no question of a pope being right and the church wrong. If the pope distances himself from the church – perhaps by not listening to it – the pope, not the church, has to change his mind. If he refuses to listen and falls into heresy, he is pope no longer, for, having abandoned the faith, he is not even a Christian.

Theologians tend to say that a distinction has to be made here. A pope, like any Christian, can err in private matters of faith. What the Spirit promises is that he will not mislead the church when he makes an *ex cathedra* definition concerning faith and morals.

The distinction of the pope speaking (1) as pope and (2) with some other hat on – either as a private theologian or diocesan bishop or a pastoral preacher – has one serious defect: it was unheard of in the early church. No one ever said when a pope was convicted of heresy: 'He is a heretic but

Chapter XII – Papal Heretics

fortunately for us he was not speaking *ex cathedra*.' Why? Because no one thought he was able to define the faith of the church. That was for the General Council to do. That is what General Councils did. A pope could endanger the faith of the church, as did Honorius, but no pope on his own ever formulated the faith for the church. There were occasions when such a gift would have been a boon – say, during the Arian controversy or when the divinity of the Spirit was questioned. Today, all Catholics would turn to Rome for a decision in even small matters, then, no one turned to Rome for a 'final word' even when the foundations of the faith were tottering.

Papal infallibility runs into an even bigger difficulty. If papal heresies of the past do not come under the heading of *ex cathedra* statements, which papal teachings do? When did popes first speak to and for the whole church in a definitive way? Certainly not in the first millennium. Some would say not till 1302, others not until 1854. If this is so, Roman pontiffs as such did not err simply because they did not exercise this function at all.

Papal infallibility is supposed to be crucial to the church's faith and a way of *regulating* it. How can this be when it was not exercised for most of church history? One can understand the *church* being infallible, either in Council or through its normal episcopal teaching worldwide. But it is hard to make sense of a critical role for the pope that was never exercised until he was actually proclaimed infallible by a Council and that has been exercised only once in the last century.

This analysis is not quite accurate. One pope certainly did exercise infallibility before Vatican I. Pius IX is so central to an understanding of the modern papacy that he requires a chapter to himself.

Vicar of Christ definition: the Pope when regarded as Christ's earthly representative | Meaning, pronunciation, translations and examples.Â Translator. Pronunciation Playlists. Word of the day : cavy. NEW from Collins! Easy Learning English Grammar. Vicar of Christ in American. noun. Roman Catholic Church. the pope, with reference to his claim to stand in the place of Jesus Christ and possess His authority in the church. Also: Vicar of Jesus Christ. Most material Â© 2005, 1997, 1991 by Penguin Random House LLC.