

A (Very) Short Overview of the Papacy

One thing everybody knows about Catholicism is that we have a Pope. And everybody knows what the Pope does, don't they? That's right: the Pope gets up in the morning, puts on his big hat, and spends his day:

- Trampling on the rights of conscience, particularly when it comes to hounding and persecuting poor, victimised theologians like Charles Curran, who has to keep body and soul together by scratching out a living teaching at some obscure little Nowheresville college called the Southern Methodist University of Dallas (I've never heard of it, have you?) and Hans Küng, who has been silenced so effectually that we never hear anything from him at all anymore ever
- Scheming to take over the world (possibly, though not always, in league with at least one of the following: the Jesuits, the Freemasons, the New World Order, the International Jewish Conspiracy, the Communists, the Fascists, Opus Dei, liberal left-wing Catholics, conservative right-wing Catholics, so-called "Protestants" other than my own Truly True sect, Buddhists, Muslims, atheists, the Mafia, trades unions, Big Government, the World Bank and the President of the United States of America regardless of party affiliation. Sometimes he's in league with several seemingly-opposed groups at once, but that just shows how sneaky he is)
- Oppressing women
- Oppressing LGBT people
- Oppressing everyone else who isn't a Catholic
- Oppressing everyone who *is* a Catholic beneath the iron fist of his tyranny if they dare exercise their free conscience (see the first point on this list)
- Polishing his hooves while waiting for the call to throw off his disguise and reveal himself as the Anti-Christ
- Being implacably opposed to science and scientists (despite the establishment of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Vatican Observatory)
- Seeking to do away with the pure Gospel and replace it with paganism and the fond inventions of foolish men
- Committing genocide in Africa because he would prefer millions to die of AIDs rather than overturn "Humanae Vitae" and also because he's just that evil (see above re: the Anti-Christ)
- Personally running the Inquisition and overseeing the torture of heretics in the dungeons beneath the Palace of the Holy Office (oh, sure, they renamed it the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith but as every newspaper article likes to point out when discussing the current Bishop of Rome, Cardinal Ratzinger was the Prefect of the Congregation before he was Pope – and are we supposed to believe that he really gave up the job?)

- Generally rubbing his hands together in evil glee, cackling maniacally, and kicking puppies (though the present Successor of the Fisherman is fond of cats, so kittens are probably safe)

However, I can reveal the truth: what the Supreme Pontiff really does, once he gets up in the morning and puts on his big hat, is this <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/298937>

Well, all right, perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between those two extremes. Before we get to the boring, dull, factual material, though, let's have a gander at all the fun stuff!

So... the perennial favourites of every tabloid newspaper and TV exposé: sex, money, politics, power and religion. It's all there. Scandals, betrayals, sin and outright unedifying behaviour all round, up to at least cynicism and functional agnosticism, if not heresy and atheism.

To date (including Pope Benedict XVI), there are 265 accepted Popes. There are also a whole list of anti-Popes, except that sometimes those who were considered anti-Popes in one generation have been considered legitimate Popes by another, and *vice versa* – to quote a sidenote from Wikipedia on a favourite Catholic Apocalypse novel of mine, “Lord of the World”, regarding Pope Sylvester III: “Until the first years of 20th century, he was classified as an antipope, so Robert Hugh Benson, in Lord of the World, calls the Last Pope "Sylvester III", not "Sylvester IV". Benson calls Sylvester's predecessor "John XXIV" and not "John XXIII" because, in 1907, Pisan Antipopes Alexander V and John XXIII were considered true popes.” Sylvester seems to have been accepted as a legitimate Pope basically because his predecessor (who was also his successor), Benedict IX, was a real piece of work who got the job through bribery, corruption and a well-connected family and proceeded to – well, look him up yourself and have your eyes opened. But he was nonetheless considered a valid Pope and if he could be, then so could anyone. Is it any wonder that my dearly beloved Dante has only one Pope, and that one is St. Peter, in his “Paradiso”, one Pope in his “Purgatorio” but an entire sub-section of one of the Circles of Hell in the “Inferno” chock-full of Popes?

We've even had three Popes at the one time (primarily due to the Avignon schism in the 14th century which ended up with (1) the French papal court in Avignon electing its own claimants (2) the cardinals who had remained in Rome electing theirs and (3) the Pisans also having a go, which I don't know how they managed to get involved. Yes, we can't even agree which Pope was which, sometimes. Yet more evidence that Catholicism is *not* an organised religion.

And that brings us up to the Renaissance, which is when the fun *really* begins. The Borgias! Nepotism! Mistresses! Enriching your family, both legitimate and illegitimate! Incest! Poison! Fun for all the family! (Probably not quite as exciting as later poets and chroniclers have given us to understand, but pretty bad all the same). Not all Borgias, either, but a good selection of pontiffs more interested in power-politics in Europe, playing the French off against the Spanish, and going to war than in being pastors.

We come to Martin Luther's old friend, Pope Leo X, one of the Medicis, who is alleged to have said on his election "Since God has given us the Papacy, let us enjoy it" and who was more of a lover than a fighter (well, more of a humanist than a fighter, let us say; unlike the warlike Julius II; Leo was more interested in endowing and supporting learning and charitable institutions. And his pet white elephant, Hanno).

It was also Leo who blew through all the revenues accumulated by Julius, and who then was responsible (amongst other schemes for making money) for licensing the likes of Tetzel. Yes, *that* Tetzel of Reformation fame. Leo also ignored the importance of what was happening with Luther and the other reformers, brushing it off as a squabble of German monks and they'd think differently when they were sober. However, to be fair to Leo, his attention was diverted more by the threat of the Ottoman emperor Selim I, and with trying to patch up some kind of peace between the European powers so that a crusade could be launched (this fell through, but the reality of the threat was demonstrated by Selim's successor, Suleiman the Magnificent, who made it all the way to Belgrade and was only stopped in his advance at the siege of Vienna). He was succeeded by Adrian VI, who was Dutch, attempted to stay out of politics, embarked on cleaning up the various abuses in the Church, launched the Counter-Reformation, was wildly unpopular with the Roman people because he wasn't lavish and scholarly but rather pious, and died after four years of this thankless struggle.

Enter Clement VII, another Medici, who was much more worldly. Unfortunately, he got himself into a tussle with Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, and came off much the worse: see the Sack of Rome, which is why, ever since 1527 when the Swiss Guard died nearly to a man (147 out of 189, the remainder left with the Pope as his guard) to protect the flight of the Pope, we still have to this day these in the Vatican.

Because Clement had been so soundly beaten by Charles, when it came to the annulment of Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, Charles' aunt, he was not inclined to do anything to offend the Habsburgs (quite apart from the theological and canon law difficulties). So Henry got his back up and the Reformation kicked off in England.

Things quietened down a bit in the next three centuries, apart from the on-going loss of temporal power, the spread of Protestantism, and various ins and outs. Really, we haven't had a good heretic or anti-Pope for ages by now. It's all gotten terribly boring – well, apart from waiting to see will *this* guy finally be the one to come out as the Anti-Christ? No luck as yet, but hope springs eternal!

A (Very) Short Overview of the Papacy: Part Deux!

At this point, you're probably saying "But good God almighty, woman, this is the perfect reason why the office of the Papacy is a travesty!" Well, to all those of you who say "Catholics have a Pope" – with the corollary, overt or implied, "And we don't" – I'd just like to say "Oh yes you do, and his name is Paul." Every time I've followed a recommended link to a preacher or minister on justification or what have you, it's all Galatians this and Corinthians that. For every one time I've seen "Jesus says in Matthew..." or "John's Gospel tells us...", I've seen ten or more "Paul says...". You may call 'em Epistles, but you treat 'em like Encyclicals.

And now that I've insulted the 98% of the readership that aren't Episcopalian...

To try and be a little more serious, here's a link to a television series from 1997, based on a book by Eamon Duffy, entitled "Saints and Sinners – the History of the Popes"

[http://www.movie-nerd.com/showthread.php?20657-Saints-And-Sinners-The-History-Of-The-Popes-Series-\(1997\)](http://www.movie-nerd.com/showthread.php?20657-Saints-And-Sinners-The-History-Of-The-Popes-Series-(1997))

It's a good overview and isn't afraid to delve into the messiness of it all. I think it slightly over-emphasises the politics at the beginning, but the political situation in Galilee, the Province of Judaea as a whole, Rome and the Empire and its division between East and West over the first four centuries of the Christian Era do affect how the Church survived and developed. It's also not afraid to suggest that Church history isn't as smooth as it has been represented, and indeed that some of the Popes may even have been legendary (as to that, I'm a lot more easy on the matter of coincidence; I'm as prepared to accept that there may genuinely have been a man named Sixtus who became the sixth Pope because there are examples of doctors named "Blood" and racecar drivers named "Speed").

There are two objections that are, or used to be, raised against the Papacy. The first was the assumption of temporal power. With the loss of the Papal States and the reduction of such claims to the Vatican City State, this is of less concern nowadays – though there are always the die-hards who claim that the Pope is trying to take over governments or impose his rule. Personally, I think it's a very good thing that this power has been lost, and I can't think of one person who would like to see it back (maybe there's some Ultra-Super-Maximum-Really Radical Traditionalist in a cave somewhere, but I've never seen a call for 'Restore the Papal States!' even by those who would like to see the *triregnum* worn again).

So how did this come about in the first place? Because when the Empire split – when Constantine picked up and went off to Byzantium – that naturally left a power vacuum. When the civil power is busy establishing itself in the Eastern half of the Empire, or removing the seat of Western power to a different city, and when the barbarian hordes are streaming in over the Alps, who is left? In the 5th century, the prestige and honour of the office meant that Pope Leo I was one of the three envoys sent by the Emperor to negotiate with Attila the Hun and persuade him not to sack Rome. In the 6th century, when the Emperor was reigning from the East and the Lombards were invading and pillaging Italy, it was left up to Gregory I to take charge of the territories abandoned by the secular powers.

What organisation is set up to handle charitable donations, has a hierarchical structure and a centralised authority, has bases pretty much everywhere, and is a recognised and respected authority?

Someone had to step up and take the lead. As Eamon Duffy describes it in his book and series, the Roman Catholic Church – and the office of the Papacy – is the oldest surviving institute on Earth. Empires and dynasties have fallen and risen, the city of Rome itself became a backwater left behind by the progress of history, but the Church remains. And at the head of the Church, Peter.

And this is the second and most divisive element: the assumption of spiritual power.

Actually, I'm going to swerve aside here for a moment and say that it's not just Catholics who have a Pope. The Copts have one, also; in fact, the Patriarch of Alexandria was the first to assume the title. And the various Orthodox and Oriental Churches are led by Patriarchs who, while they may not claim the same authority or exercise it in the same way as the Latin understanding, do indeed have authority and precedence (even if it is expressed as *primus inter pares*).

My point being there has to be someone with whom the buck stops. There has to be someone who is the last resort, the last court of appeal. For the East, that person was the Emperor, and the same attitude crept into Reformation Europe – Henry in England declared himself Supreme Head of the Church (softened by his successors to Supreme Governor), and the princes of Europe, whether Catholic or Protestant, were quite happy to carve out spiritual as well as temporal authority for themselves: *cuius regio, eius religio*, an attitude supported by the Reformers as well, as we see with Luther throwing his support behind the German princes in the matter of the Peasants' Revolt of 1525. Lutheran princes and English monarchs were just as happy to persecute for heresy as their Catholic counterparts, though generally both sides were more interested in the politics and the temporal power accruing from such struggles. What lands did we see State Churches arising in (do we still see surviving to this day?) where you could be fined for non-attendance at compulsory religious services? Church of England – where the Lords Spiritual sit in the House of Lords, one of the two Chambers of the British Parliament. On the other hand, Catholic clergy are forbidden to run for or take up any public office. The Caesaro-papism of the Orthodox Churches, Lutheran churches in the Nordic countries, Germany's state-deducted "church tax", Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* and the Falk Laws; China's Patriotic Catholic Association...ask the 17th and 18th century Dissenters and Non-Conformists how freely Protestant England allowed them to exercise their conscience when it came to the Church of England by Law Established.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and suggest that the Reformation happened not *despite* the Papacy, but *because* of the Papacy. Not the obvious reasons, but that it was enabled precisely because for centuries the Catholic Church had been fighting the attempts of secular rulers to run local church affairs as one more branch of their temporal power. Ironically, because of the attitude that religion was free from external interference, this spurred on the Reformers to stand up and exercise that freedom of conscience.

"But...but...the Inquisition!"

Which one? The Spanish Inquisition, which is what most people mean? There were several Inquisitions – there was one at Rome, also. But the Spanish Inquisition is another example of temporal political exercise of power. The monarchs who had just driven out the Muslim rulers were seeking a means of unifying the individual provinces of Spain. They embarked on a programme of cultural identity politics – can you say "culture wars" and "America was founded as a Christian nation and has always been a Christian nation"? – that was just as much about creating an ideal of national identity and either assimilating or purging any 'foreign' elements – Jews and Muslims. It was under the direct control of the monarchy and often came into conflict with the Papacy.

Anyway, back to my main topic:

“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

“And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: 32 But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.”

“So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?”

He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

He said to him, “Feed My lambs.”

16 He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?”

He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

He said to him, “Tend My sheep.”

17 He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?”

And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.”

Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep. 18 Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.” 19 This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me.”

These are the verses upon which all the claims rest. That Peter was given authority and responsibility above the rest of the Twelve. That this authority and responsibility devolves upon his successors. That, just as it seemed necessary to the Twelve to elect one to fill the place of Judas, that those appointed after them share in the teaching office of the Apostles.

That is what the Magisterium is: not just a collection of Tradition and writings, but a living thing, as the Word of God is a living Person, not just a collection of writings gathered in a canon. The Pope and the bishops in communion have the duty to exercise this teaching office – as Paul exercised his teaching office, writing his Epistles to the churches he had founded and guiding them.

The Pope has much less power than what is popularly imagined. He can and does claim my obedience in matters of faith and morals. He cannot bind the Universal Church to eat its greens or ride a bicycle to work instead of driving an SUV. The Pope cannot declare the Official Nut, Cereal, Beverage or Fashion Colour of the Roman Catholic Church and the Churches in Communion with Her.

The claim is that of infallibility, not of impeccability. What that means is that we believe the Pope – any Pope – is not going to teach false doctrine. That does not mean the Pope is sinless (and as you saw in the first half of this, there is plenty of evidence of that). All it means is that we believe Jesus when He said the Church would be preserved. We believe the Holy Spirit works to prevent heresy and false teaching – and that’s all. Even the worst of the Popes didn’t, for some odd reason, mess around with things even when they could have changed disciplines to make things easier for themselves.

After all, if the Pope can marry, then he can have legitimate offspring who can inherit all the fat benefices and prime posts of the Church just like his secular family inherit titles and crowns – and yet, this was never done, despite all the grabbing and nepotism and trading of offices the noble families indulged in.

Leo X spent money like water on hunting and the arts and amusements – and also on hospitals, schools, charitable institutions; he protected the rights of the Uniate Greeks and showed favour to the Jews of Rome. Even the disgusting Benedict IX did not use his office to declare that sin was not sin (and so absolve himself of guilt and crime), which makes him a hypocrite but not a heretic. Men who owed their position to patronage, to buying the office, to exerting pressure and even violence against rivals, once they were in power never changed the basic doctrines (even while they were disgraces in all other ways and were grabbing temporal power in as huge swathes as they could). And in between the infamous, there were truly pious, devout, believing men who steered the Barque of Peter.

There's a Borgia saint (a Portuguese cousin of the Roman branch) and not because his family bought that status, but because he gave up worldly power and entered a life of religion.

The worst of them – and the worst have been very bad indeed – had yet some spark of something that preserved us from what they might have done. The best of them – and there have been some very good ones – have had faults. They're men, not gods, and most assuredly not in the place of God. Look at the history of the Church, look at all those who have been assured that today, finally, the hour is come when this thing, this mass of corruption, this superstitious nonsense is finally defeated (by the Bible in the vernacular, by the Enlightenment, by democracy, by science) and yet survives and remains. Look at Jerusalem and Antioch and Alexandria and Constantinople, and all the churches that were honoured, established, and great when Rome was a dusty backwater relic of past greatness fit only to be used for quarrying building material from the rubble of antiquity, clinging on to its patrimony from Peter. That's not us or our doing, that's the Holy Spirit.

All the Popes are like the first Pope, Peter, who was rebuked by Jesus Himself as “Satan” only moments after his declaration of faith in Christ; who denied his Lord three times and repented bitterly; who went along with the Judaizers for the sake of not rocking the boat, yet who was sent the vision from God to back up Paul; who went to Rome, yet in popular legend was persuaded to flee persecution until, on the outskirts of Rome, he met Jesus “going to Rome, to be crucified again” and returned to be executed on the cross of shame, whose (reputed) bones are at the heart and foundation of the massive, glorious structure of St. Peter's and are still the rock upon which the Church rests as She clings to the hand of Her Saviour, crying “Lord, save me! Preserve me as You promised!”