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SAINT OR SINNER? POPE CELESTINE V

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The oldest surviving papal tiara, c. 1834.

On December 13th, 1294, the Roman Catholic Pope, Celestine V, and the College of Cardinals met in a full consistory or formal meeting. To the shock of almost all of the gathered cardinals, Celestine stood up, read a brief text abdicating the office of the papacy, stripped himself of all papal insignia, and begged the group to elect a new pope immediately.

With this dramatic gesture, Pietro del Morrone resigned from the papacy leaving behind an ambiguous legacy.

Del Morrone had been an unexpected choice for Pope when he was elected in 1294 some twenty-seven months after his predecessor, Pope Nicholas IV, died. Born to peasants, Pietro began his career at the Benedictine monastery of Santa Maria di Faifula. Within a few years however, communal life lost its appeal and he withdrew to a cave on Mount Morrone. There he chose to live alone, devoting himself to quiet meditation and prayer.

Ironically, it was Pietro's desire to live a solitary life, far from worldly concerns, that led to his eventual election as Pope.

Traditional religious hermits rejected the material world, seeking to know God and receive wisdom through extreme simplicity. These religious anchorites often became objects of great curiosity and interest to the nearby locals. As their fame spread, they drew the attention of pious pilgrims as well as the official church. Even the most unsophisticated and ill-educated hermits came to be viewed as the source of special spiritual wisdom and strength. Rather than being left alone to pray quietly, they became the center of attention: pilgrims begged for advice and miracles; monks asked to join them; priests looked to them for guidance.

Pietro, in his small cave, was no different. After about fifteen years on Mount Morrone, Pietro decided to withdraw to an even more inaccessible location in the Maiella Mountains of the Abruzzi region of Italy.

Even this did not save him. Disciples flocked to him and eventually they were formally incorporated into the Benedictine order of monks (later known as Celestines). Under Pietro, the brothers followed the Rule of St. Benedict and were completely independent of the local bishops.

Over time, the new order accumulated money and property. Pietro became abbot of Santa Maria di Faifula. As his reputation as a miraculous healer, an ascetic, and an effective leader grew, so too did his contact with the outside world. Charles I, King of Sicily extended his official protection to Pietro's monastery. His name was known to cardinals within the papal curia and to the powerful families of Rome.

In 1293, Pietro moved back to Mount Morrone where he had built a monastery, San Spirito. There he lived in a small grotto halfway up the mountain, relinquishing any official position in his order. Finally, at the age of 83 he would achieve the quiet and solitude he had long sought.

Unfortunately for Pietro, his retirement coincided with a period of chaos within the Papal Curia. Pope Nicholas IV had died on April 4th, 1292. The twelve cardinals of the college gathered to elect a successor but they were divided by personal feuds. To succeed, a candidate needed to garner two thirds of the majority during balloting. Months passed as the group failed to reach an agreement on any candidate.

The heat of the Roman summer made them ill: twice the conclave broke up so the cardinals could escape to the cooler countryside. During one of these periods in 1293, the faction led by the Colonna family took advantage of the absence of their enemies to push the election of their own candidate. Even in the absence of one of the factions, they failed to elevate a new pope.

The need for a legitimate election became more urgent. Cardinal Jean Cholet of St. Cecilia died on August 2nd, 1293. Only a new Pope could appoint a replacement of Cholet; in the absence of a pope, Cholet's seat remained vacant.



The church of S. Spirito with hermitage at top of photo..

Charles II, King of Sicily and Naples intervened in March of 1294, putting forward four candidates of his own choosing. Still the cardinals could not agree.

Meanwhile, the volatile populace of Rome took advantage of the empty see and resultant chaos. Rioting and disorder dominated the city. Fighting erupted in the Orvieto region of Italy.

In a tense meeting on July 5th, 1294, Cardinal Latino Malabranca disclosed that a holy hermit had made a prophecy that if the conclave continued to disagree, God would punish them. Malabranca, the son of a Roman senator, was a member of the Orsini family – one of the most powerful families in Rome. In his position as Cardinal of Ostia, and Dean of the College of Cardinals, he wielded enormous power in the conclave.

Pressed for more information, Malabranca revealed the name of the devout hermit: Pietro del Marrone. In an astonishing move, Malabranca then proposed that the college elect del Marrone. Casting his own vote for the monk, Malabranca challenged the cardinals to select as pope someone who had never served in the highest ranks of the church and who did not belong to one of the powerful Roman factions that controlled the curia.

Desperate, the cardinals eventually voted for this monk who had spent a lifetime fleeing power, authority, and community. Under protest, Pietro del Marrone accepted his election. A relieved Charles II escorted the hermit to L'Aquila and del

Marrone entered the city astride a donkey, visibly imitating Christ's entry into Jerusalem. Consecrated under the name Celestine V, he was widely viewed as ushering in a more spiritual papacy than the worldly Roman curia had seen in decades.

Unfortunately, the very qualities that had made him a revered hermit made him a weak, ineffectual pope. Celestine was naïve, unsophisticated, and ill-educated.

Taking up residence not in Rome, but in Naples, Celestine fell completely under the thumb of Charles II. He appointed twelve new cardinals, including seven Frenchmen at Charles' insistence, infuriating the great families of Rome.

He was so poorly educated that for the first time ever, meetings with the cardinals had to be held in Italian rather than Latin. He was uninterested in the governance of the church, allowing the day-to-day administration to fall into chaos. He frequently assigned the same post to separate priests, creating further disorder.

The new Pope favored his own monastic order, granting them unprecedented privileges and power, even attempting to annex rich monasteries for the Celestines.

Within five months, Celestine felt overwhelmed by the chaos his own naivety had created. He asked to hand over the church's administration to three cardinals for the period of Advent so that he might devote himself to prayer. The College of Cardinals refused his request.

Finally, he consulted privately with Cardinal Benedetto Caetani. Known for his expertise in canon law, Caetani incorrectly told Celestine that church law allowed for voluntary resignation. Together, the two drafted a statement of abdication detailing the reasons behind Celestine's decision to resign.



Celestine loses his tiara as Boniface gains his, Liber Sextus, 1514. Yale Law Library.

On December 10th, Celestine formally reasserted Pope Gregory X's procedure for papal election. Three days later, in a full meeting with all his cardinals, Celestine read out his abdication, removed his papal ring and other insignia, and declared himself once again, Brother Pietro.



Ironically, Benedict XVI presented his papal pallium to Celestine in 2010.

Faced with Celestine's abdication, the College of Cardinals met on the 14th and after only three ballots, elected Benedetto Caetani to the papacy. Caetani, profiting from his own advice to Celestine, became Pope Boniface VIII on December 24th, 1294.

Unlike Celestine, Caetani was worldly and clever. He knew the threat a former pope posed for creating a schism within the church. Although Pietro wanted nothing more than to return to his hermitage, Caetani ordered him held under guard. Escaping briefly, Pietro spent several months as a free man: he was recaptured when he tried to hire a boat to take him to Dalmatia. The former pope spent the remainder of his life confined to the tower of Castel Fumone, outside the city of Ferentino. There he died of an abscess on May 19th, 1296.

Celestine's ambiguous legacy endures. The great Florentine Dante Alighieri places him in Hell:

...vidi e conobbi l'ombra di colui	I saw and knew the shade of him
che fece per viltà il gran rifiuto	Who from cowardice made the great refusal.

The Divine Comedy, Inferno, III, 59-60 tr. John D. Sinclair

Dante, and many other medieval commentators viewed Celestine's abdication as a great, unforgivable sin – a refusal to submit to God's will. As an incorrigible sinner, Celestine is destined to spend eternity damned to hell.

Celestine's supporters however, whom he had showered with favors while in power, viewed him as a martyr, persecuted by Boniface VIII and forced out of the papacy. Eventually, under Clement V, this view won out and Celestine was canonized, being named a saint on May 5th, 1313.

Saint or sinner, Celestine has the enduring distinction of being one of only a handful of men to abdicate from the position of Pontifex Maximus, the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church.

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