THE CHURCH IN ITALY IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

Julius repeated, even on the foundation stone which, needless to say, carried Julius’s name on it. He laid the stone on 18 April 1506, just before his expedition to Romagna. There was soon to be a new church in more ways than just a fresh St Peter’s.

The background to the Reformation in Italy (‘reform before the Reformation’) and the connection between clergy and Renaissance will be discussed later and it will bring us back to the Vatican and St Peter’s. In the next chapter an attempt will be made to analyse the state of the clergy in fifteenth-century Italy, seculars and regulars, and the machinery of synod and visitation which in theory should have provided inspiration and prevented abuse.

4

THE STATE OF THE CLERGY AND LAITY IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

Secular clergy

In this chapter some impressions will be given of the clergy of Italy, seculars and regulars, and of the laity to whom many of them ministered. In approaching in this way somewhat nearer to the actual religious life of the period it is important not to forget how varied were the organisations in which Christians found themselves, even in the one obedience, even in one country or region, before the sixteenth century. I remarked before how difficult a problem it was to get behind Trent, when a mask of uniformity was laid on Roman Catholic Europe. We must constantly remind ourselves that the concepts of the parish, of the bishop and perhaps even of the cloister, were much more fluid in the Middle Ages, at any rate after the twelfth century, than in the epoch of the Counter-Reformation, or the Catholic Reformation as one is nowadays encouraged to call it.

Despite papal leadership, despite canon law, a thousand years of Latin Christendom had left many oddities and variations; it is far from being the case that the services of the church were the same all over the Latin west; and the organisations that supported these services varied to an even greater degree. The discussion of the diocese and the parish in chapter 2 will have made this pretty evident to anyone at all familiar with the medieval churches of England or France.

This deserves to be stressed at the outset, since in England and in other northern European countries we are accustomed to find out about the pre-Reformation situations – both of laity and clergy – through the records maintained by bishops and their canons. The form this normally took was the copying of all the episcopal acta in large volumes called registers. England’s series of bishops’ registers is one of the most remarkable sources available for medieval history. By the end of the thirteenth century keeping records was increasingly regarded as an obligation by all bishops, but it could
active supervision of the clergy in Italy by their pastors. Much more such material doubtless exists, as observed already, and there is surely a good deal in print which I have failed to note. But it is pretty clear that visitations were rare. When those mentioned are examined it will appear evident that they do not indicate a high level of spirituality in either visitors or visited.

First, however, it is proper to discuss ordinations. Canonically these involved certain external and certain internal requirements, though we must remember that regulations on these matters were far from systematic and are found scattered in various parts of that systematic jungle, the corpus juris canonici. The external requirements which had to be met were:

1. Ordination had to be by the ordinary of the clerk involved, or with his permission (through the issue of letters dimissory). The point of this was that the candidate’s bishop might be expected to know the propriety of his entering the ranks of the clergy.

2. Ordination had to occur at the appointed times. First tonsure could take place on any day, but minor orders could only be conferred on holy days and major orders only on the Saturdays of the Four Seasons (Quattro tempori, or Ember days) and on the Saturdays preceding Easter and the fifth Monday of Lent (Sintientes).

3. The recipient of orders had to have a ‘title’, i.e. a means of support: a benefice, an office (for instance at the curia) or private income; membership of a religious order constituted a title, since all orders were in theory vowed to individual poverty and the friars also to corporate poverty.

4. Finally, a due interval had to occur between the conferment of one order and the next.

5. No money was to be charged for any ordination.

As for the internal or personal requirements these may be listed thus:

1. A candidate must be of decent appearance, and there must be no scandal, no repellent disease or deformity.

2. He must have attained the appropriate age: about 7 for first tonsure and minor orders; 18 for the sub-diaconate; 20 for diaconate, 25 for priesthood, 30 for bishops. (Friars were privileged and might be ordained priest at the age of 22.)

3. He must be of good conduct and virtuous background; in
continued well into the sixteenth century to frequent the celebrated theology schools at Paris and Cologne. The history of the Sapienza, the Roman university, in the fifteenth century is a sad one, while the so-called Palatine university, the school presided over by the theologian in the papal curia who was entitled magister palatinus, is obscure indeed at this time. The Italian universities were slow to acquire faculties of theology, or to incorporate within themselves the teaching sometimes available in an adjacent Dominican convent. Nor was formal teaching in the arts (the trivium without which reading and writing Latin was hard to perfect) always available. Some cathedral churches did have a scholasticus; there was one at Pisa, but he taught (it seems) only the cathedral clergy, not the candidates for ordinations of the diocese as a whole. We know there was one at Verona before 1440 when Eugenius IV took drastic steps to endow the office. In the noble chapter of Milan the archbishop had dutifully provided a theologia, but his influence on education seems to have been minimal. Several attempts were made to found seminaries in the fifteenth century: at Pavia, Bologna, Rome - but none were effective save those in Rome, about which more will be said later in connection with reform. In any case the effective influence of the colleges established by Capranica and Nardini at Rome came at the very end of the fifteenth century.

The examination of ordinands by the bishop or his deputy was perfunctory in even well regulated dioceses in north Europe. In Italy, as elsewhere, it seems often to have been avoided, if not entirely at ordination at any rate before collation to a living, so that the topsy-turvy situation arose of a beneficed clerik later seeking the appropriate orders with a title but sometimes without any other of the required qualifications. When Nardini was archbishop of Milan he legislated on this question in 1468. But in Italy, as throughout Europe, there was an easygoing acceptance of the rightness of propriety and where a family held the advowson even a saintly bishop like Antonino of Florence, who took examinations of ordinands seriously, seems to have seen nothing improper in the granting of minor orders to sprigs of patrician stock merely to enable them to enjoy the income from a family church; in 1459 Antonino conferred minor orders on Filippo de' Canigiani who a fortnight later was inducted into the family living of S. Severo in Valla Marina. A further factor contributing to slackness was the absence of a bishop, the regular way in which a vicar in spirituals performed those actions for which a bishop was required. In the 343 ordinations of which details survive in Bologna between 1341 and 1508, the bishop himself was present
on only 18 occasions – and Bologna, let it be remembered, was a great see and had one or two devout bishops, including Niccolò Albergati.28 In 16 ordinations at Pavia between 1464 and 1498 of which we have details the bishop was never present, only a suffragan.29 The letters dimissory and the title were also productive of inadequate supervision. As has been pointed out, the whole intention of episcopal responsibility lay in the assumption that the bishop knew the youths he was ordaining as members of his flock; most Italian dioceses were indeed small enough to make this reasonable – which is one reason why we find no territorial archdeacons on the northern model in the peninsula. But this intimacy was frustrated not only by employing a deputy, some bishop in partibus or a hungry prelate from Calabria or the Abruzzi, but also by the extravagant and uncritical use of letters dimissory. Sometimes this can be partly explained by a see being celebrated, so that ordination there had added lustre, or perhaps might help a candidate to win important friends. Avignon, for instance, was magnetic in this way in France and adjacent countries. Long after the popes had left it the presence of a legate and the connection with Rome caused a high proportion of ordinands there to come from far afield.30 Other places which attracted ordinands were seats of great universities. At Padua, of the 677 clergy ordained between 1396 and 1410, nearly a third came from outside the diocese, including a fair number of iranier, especially Germans.31 But we may suspect that candidates often went to a distant diocese in order to avoid too close a scrutiny. When Savona- rola was ordained deacon at Bologna in 1477, of the 21 seculars ordained 6 had letters dimissory, 3 subdeacons, 2 deacons and 1 priest. As for titles we may note in this same ordination that nearly half the seculars were received ad titulum patrem, that is, the family guaranteed the cash; 6 were beneficed; 2 apparently had no title, which is the sinister aspect of the affair.32

All the problems touched on in the last few pages are found, in an aggravated form, in the practice of creating clergy in the curia itself. There are 14 volumes in the Vatican Archives called Formatorii or Libri formatorum, from the name given to some of the documents (mostly letters testimonial) therein registered. The letters testimonial, together with a few letters dimissory, refer to the general ordinations which are also listed by the cameral notaries. A few consecrations of bishops and abbots (the episcopal dignity was not an ordine as such) are also recorded. The volumes cover the period 1426 to 1524, but the last ordination is recorded in 1500.33 These volumes have been carefully scanned by scholars from Germany, from Poland, from Ireland and Scotland. But – and it will be recalled that this is not untypical of the Vatican Archives – they have not been looked at by anyone directly interested in the Italian clergy as a whole, though Father Kneppel has extracted the Dominican names. They deserve consideration here since, even if every bishop in Italy had been resilient and scrupulous in examining ordinands, it would still have been possible for the ambitious and the unscrupulous to obtain orders with a minimum of trouble in the Roman curia which still conveniently moved a good deal in the fifteenth century, as has already been mentioned. With a minimum of trouble, certainly, but it should be added, with a maximum of expense – prohibited though it was to charge for the conferment of orders as a clear case of simony. And technically, of course, it was the letters and their registration that were taxed, though many candidates must have associated the orders with payment of cash.34 All the acts registered in the Libri formatorum were undertaken in the name and by the authority of the camerarios; ultimately they derived from the powers of the pope as universal ordinary. None of this need necessarily have been corrupting, but contemporaries had no doubt that these ceremonies were a dangerous feature of the contemporary church. Numbers were often large: 58 received first tonsure on 21 December 1471, when there were also 16 minor orders conferred, and 31 holy orders, 105 in all. When General Ordinations occurred in Rome (and they probably did after 1449 – this too had ‘gone out of court’) notice was posted on the doors of the Castel Sant’ Angelo, at the Campo dei Fiori and at San Celso (opposite S. Angelo across the bridge), adjuring those interested to present themselves during office hours on the Wednesday, Thursday and Friday preceding the Saturday of the ceremony.35 Often these proceedings must have lacked dignity, and usually they must have involved only the most superficial verification of qualification and title. The ill-arranged, not to say slatternly, organisation of the registers themselves confirms that a certain degree of disorderliness pervaded the whole process. Naturally many foreigners are found – Germans, French, Spaniards, and a few natives of the British Isles. But there are also a very large number of Italians, more especially on the occasion when the curia found itself in Florence, for instance, under Eugenius IV when Tuscans often formed the largest group.36 One would like to know what happened during Pius II’s migrations but the registers covering his episcopate are missing. Is this a sign of commotion? True, general ordinations were by then available regularly, but would presumably have been arranged also in the part of the curia which was still itinerant.
The reason for recalling how easy it was to obtain ordination is that it goes a long way to explain practically unanimous evidence of the low quality of many Italian clergy. Some of this evidence must now be presented, but it must be recalled that the Italian picture is perhaps only marginally more dismal than that provided by the abbé Toussaint in his book *Le sentiment religieux en Flandre à la fin du moyen âge*, or by the abbé Paul Adam in his study of the parish life in fourteenth-century France. By comparison studies of the English clergy reveal a pattern both less depressing and with fewer gleams of a higher level of devotion. It will be easier to proceed in a roughly chronological way.

1. Albergati visiting the diocese of Bologna (1417–25) found not only crumbling buildings and a general neglect of material resources, but also priests unable to identify the seven mortal sins or to read the breviary. He found it necessary to reiterate an injunction of one of his predecessors that no one could celebrate mass who was not ordained as a priest. It seems that the notarial instrument registering Saint Antonino’s metropolitical visitation of Fiesole and Pistoia which has never been printed in full (it is at Pisa) cannot be published because it is in such a bad condition. The conditions it describes are also pretty awful: dilapidation, even abandonment of churches; sacristies and service books in a deplorable state; the priest often, perhaps usually, in the better livings, absent and a casual curate in his place. In many villages there were no services at all: the young married themselves, the old died and were buried, without benefit of priest. A fair number of parishes were served by irregular regulars—im mean monks or friars, who had no faculties permitting them to break this part of their Rule. Priests with mistresses and children were far from uncommon. One priest could not read at all. Let us remember that we are talking of rich, urbanised Tuscany, home of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio.

2. Let us turn to Pisa in the second half of the fifteenth century. Here patriotic Pisans could and did (indeed still do) blame the depressed state of the clergy on the occupation of the city and its *consado* by Florence in 1406 and it seems clear that at that time there was some depopulation not only in rural areas but even in the town itself where one church was a complete ruin. There were not enough priests; often canonical services were not celebrated; a number of priests had not taken proper orders and the economic position of many was precarious—to a surprising degree they relied for subsistence on rents in kind. And there was, of course, absenteeism and pluralism—the latter often because of the shortage of priests, which often drove priests to pluralism like the priest Alberto, *pievano* at Torciano S. Martino and rector of seven other churches. Service books were usually, but alas not always, present.

4. Finally, Piacenza, for which a series of visitations between 1476 and 1534 have left surviving injunctions. In this diocese the city churches were visited more thoroughly than the country parishes where—on the rare occasion of visitations—only a few of the *chiese plebane* came under scrutiny, and not the *filialer*, which (as noted earlier) were in many cases rapidly becoming separate from the mother church. The overall picture is of sluttish conformism, a climate (says the author I am quoting) of general depression.

It is obvious that the picture one gets varies in part with the zeal of the visitor. Antonino’s searching enquiries and sharp rebukes are far removed from the rather perfunctory surveys conducted elsewhere. At Pisa, for instance, only Bishop Filippo de’ Medici personally conducted a visitation; his successors invariably commissioned as vicar eminent but not very inspiring jurists, whose questions had a mechanical ring about them, who were concerned only to detect breaches of the law. It is exactly the same at Piacenza. Now this kind of observation, it must be conceded, comes close to that erroneous attempt to make post-Tridentine norms the real touchstone, and to dismiss as empty all the bishops who do not approach the standard of Carlo Borromeo. This is of course absurd. What one can say is, first, that the impression one has of the secular clergy, the parochial clergy, of Italy is no better, perhaps a little worse, than in other provinces of the church. And that visitations, when they took place, are mechanical and legalistic.

There were other and numerous groups of secular priests who cannot be dealt with here. At one end there were the cathedral clergy, numerous, aristocratic in the richer and bigger sees, often absentee living in the papal curia or employed by a prince, their places supplied by what in English parlance were called vicars-chival. At the other end there were the multitudes of clerks in minor orders, scholars sometimes, children of impoverished but gentle families often, who took some small and ancient revenue and gave nothing in return. There were 769 such *chiericiati* in the diocese of Verona in 1440. With such persons we are in effect dealing with a group which in many respects was composed of laity, to whose spiritual condition we must turn after a brief consideration of the regular clergy.
Regular clergy

Our information on this subject is partly derived from the visitation material already discussed, but this can be supplemented by the internal visitations of their houses conducted by some regulars, and by the legislation of the chapters-general of the friars. Normal visitations often passed over the Benedictine houses, many of which were exempt. But in grave cases bishops of old and sometimes did obtain a mandate from the pope empowering them to disregard privileges.

The decline in rigorous common to most monasteries had already gone far in Italy before the fifteenth century. Claustrophobia was very imperfectly observed. The dormitory was divided up into separate rooms; individual monks sometimes held liveness in commendam. The scolastic ordinary was confronted with the laws’ delays, the reference to ancient rights and present protection. San Paolo a Ripa d’Arno at Pisa was an exempt house of the Order of Vallombrosa, one of the more austere offshoots of the Benedictine rule. Its visitation by the archbishop of Pisa was quite an event in 1470, for the house was not only exempt, it was held in commendam from 1457 to 1483. The archbishop, fortified by a brief of Sixtus IV, arrived flanked by three abbots, but was kept outside in an undignified way waiting in the rain. Finally admitted he questioned the monks, none of whom were professed. The evidence adduced suggests a depressing decline in discipline, a terrifying degree of ignorance, and, among the laity of the neighbourhood, an utter contempt for the abbettor, so-called, and the so-called monks.

Of the monastic groups who at the time conducted their own reform programme none is more celebrated than the Italian Order of Camaldoli, visited by one of their own number Ambrogio Traversari, now one of the unofficial beat of the quattrocento as well as a disciplinarian and lover of classical Latin. His peregrinations are recorded in the Hodoeporicon and in his letters. Ambrogio’s commission as Visitor derived from his election in 1431 as minister-general of an order which combined awkwardly a hermit wing and a traditional monastic side, the latter being now easily in the ascendant. His travels reveal again an almost uniform tepidity: claustrophobia was not observed; once rich monasteries were ruinous and inhabited by a prior and one or two monks; there was a good deal of incontinence and occasional dishonesty on a large scale as well as violent crime. There is (so Ambrogio said) virtually no difference or distinction between the lives of the religious (he means monks) and the secular clergy. Nearly all religious wear linen underclothes and at night sleep naked under the coverlets. ‘Indecl’, he adds ‘1 believe we monks are the winners in the competition with the seculars for wealth and self-indulgence.’ Rules of austere eating, of chastity, above all the fundamental law of obedience, these have gone save in a handful of convents. The censorious remarks scattered about Ambrogio’s writings are all the more telling since he was in practice extraordinarily gentle and long-suffering, tactful and imaginative, in dealing with the offenders he encountered.

Another group of visitation documents refer to the Greek or Basilian monasteries of southern Italy. The inspiration behind this was Bessarion’s. Soon after the latter was made a cardinal, in November 1439, he was made Protector of the Basilian monks. In 1446 a chapter-general of Greek houses in Sicily, Calabria and Apulia was held in Rome and it was the canons of this chapter which were treated as the basic minimum for observance in the visitation ordered by Bessarion ten years later by one of his trusted priests, Athanasius Chalképolos, who subsequently became a bishop in Calabria – a resident one. Athanasius visited 78 houses; there were still others, but nothing suggests that they were different from those he did see. The monks, with the rarest exceptions, were few, ignorant and in some cases illiterate, at any rate in Greek. Hence the necessity of providing many convents with the extracts from S. Basil of Caesarea, which Bessarion had himself prepared for their spiritual guidance. The visitation revealed sordid dilapidation and slothfulness. Consider, for example, the case of the convent of Santa Maria de Tripiizometa, near Reggio. The house had two inhabitants, an abbott and a monk. The abbot had a concubine by whom he had had a child before the chapter at Rome in 1446 and – perhaps more serious – five children after the rehearsal at Rome of the rules regarding chastity. He told Athanasius that ‘he could not relinquish the woman because of his affection for the children she had borne him; and further, his doctor advised sex as useful treatment for his complaint, the stone’. And elsewhere Athanasius encountered a fighting abbot, armoured and armed; he reproved him, but one feels no improvement would result, though it is hard to know what the Visitor could do without a troop of soldiers on his back. But the overall picture, the average house, displayed not wickedness on this scale but horror, tiny numbers, and minor corruption.

The moral state of the friars was, perhaps of more general significance, so largely had they contributed in the past to a general leavening of society. Here it is almost impossible to be so positive, to make brief generalisations of a safe kind, as it was with the monks.
bishops were removed from newly acquired territory; the same could happen to friars. Yet, as we shall see later, the principal supporter of reform in the Mendicant Orders was the local prince or communal government. In my opinion there is no doubt that political intervention for good and ill was far more prominent in the church life of Italy than elsewhere in Christendom.

When we look at the more humdrum legislation of chapters-general, however, we find, as with the monks, an atmosphere which would have appalled Francis and Dominic. Real mendicancy, it need hardly be said, has gone for good. The Franciscans in early fifteenth century chapters reiterate prohibitions of separate bedrooms (with a fairly lengthy list of exceptions), of extravagant dress, of actual trafficking; the repetition of these laws shows – as does all the other evidence – that they were neglected. In particular many Franciscans took secular benefices, with or without dispensation: without them, as we have seen, the shortage of priests in some areas would have been much worse than it was. Or consider the Dominicans of the Lombard Congregation, that is the Observant group. Their capitular acts have been published by Father A. D’Amato, O.P. for the years 1482–1531. In 1483 the multiplicationem fratum instiuitum was to be avoided by insisting that no one should be received nisi fuerit in grammaticalius sufficienter instructus. At Mantua in 1516 severe criticism was levelled at luxurious linen underwear, ostentatious headgear and expensive habits. Meat is not to be eaten – at any rate in the refectory or as often as twice or thrice a week (Bologna 1521). And throughout, with monotonous regularity, legislation is passed dealing with supervision of numbers. Only elderly friars are to hear confession, and they are to be frequently changed. The number of nuns is excessive and maxima are laid down for each nunnery (Brescia 1486). ‘No brother of our congregation shall carry letters, notes, gifts whatsoever for or to the nuns of our order or any other order without authority of his superior; none is to visit a nunnery without permission.’ (Bologna, 1530).

This brings us to the nuns of Italy and thence to the laity – an all too easy transition.

The nuns were particularly vulnerable because they were often girls given to religion by parents who found the dowry to be paid to a convent less than the dowry to be raised to secure a husband: in Florence the latter was ten times larger. One suspects also that many nunneries were extremely poorly endowed, and suffered sharply in the cold economic climate of the fourteenth and fifteenth
made on men's death-beds by reason of the visitation of many persons—i.e. they need social contacts in order to live it up, and doubtless they did.

This is not to say that the absence of clausuration necessarily led to the worst excesses. One might, indeed, hazard a guess that the best as well as the more respectable convents were in towns and recruited from well-to-do families—for whom a noblesse oblige sentiment imposed a kind of restraint. In any event clausuration of itself was no protection, as the many horrific stories of Italian convents in the century before the Reformation bear witness. Here too the problem could be more complicated in the towns where men of position normally married girls ten or even twenty years their junior: that is, they seem to have married relatively late and, among other diversions, found the local convent walls easy to scale, if they could not be penetrated by doors or windows. Florence in 1421 established a civic commission to deal with such offenses. In 1436 Eugenius IV ordered its dissolution since in effect it meant that citizens were taking over the disciplinary problems properly belonging to the clergy. But it survived because it was needed, because young men continued to break into nuneries. This was not only an urban problem. Ambrogio Traversari found the convent at Queceto to be inhabited by harlots and not nuns and there as elsewhere the male religious themselves—including the members of his own order—were as culpable as the nuns. The prohibitions of the Dominican chapters confirm that this was the case. We have no reason to suppose that Aretino would have chosen a nunnery as the scene of the first part of his pornographic Raggionamenti if this had not seemed entirely plausible to his readers.

We can perhaps turn to two other Camaldolese monks—or rather hermits—to sum up the overall view of the regular clergy at the end of the quattrocento: Fathers Giustianini and Quarini, who presented in 1513 a 'Libellus ad Leonem Decem', to which we must return later, since it is one of the most important plans for a general reformation in Italy. What they chiefly deplored was the ignorance of the regular clergy, insinuating itself day by day into more and more and even higher places, consuming and corrupting Christian purity. Many thousands of regulars (say these two Venetians) cannot adequately read and write. 'In the whole multitude of religious scarcely two in a hundred or perhaps ten in a thousand can be found who can read the daily services.' And of this few there are still fewer who have mastered grammar and followed a systematic course of instruction. And of this minority of a minority, of this
The bulk of mankind and womankind, even in an Italy where one sometimes feels that every other person was clerical in status, consisted of the laity. Did all these bishops and the lesser clergy to match, the archpriests and canons, the parish priests and their assistants, the monks and the friars and the nuns, the clerks in minor orders – did they have no effect at all on the quality of religious life in pre-Reformation Italy? What, one might ask, was the church aiming at, if not at the instruction or at least the edification of the laity?

The formal evidence is fairly unanimous for this period. S. Antonino's visitation in Tuscany laid bare villages where there was no priest, where many people were married and buried literally without ceremony. The Pisan visitations at the end of the century confirm this. Often there were no services and it seems established that, when services did occur, there was no attempt to explain Christian teaching (nor, incidentally, did the visitors seem to think that there should have been). The priests deplored that the people did not come to church or even confess and take communion once a year, as laid down in the Fourth Lateran Council. The church buildings, neglected by the clergy, were often used as meeting places or barns and here too the sacraments other than mass were sometimes not kept reverently, or even at all. Nowhere is there evidence of confirmation – but then that is true of almost the whole of Christendom and nearly all the later Middle Ages. These remarks, it should be stressed, are based on evidence from Tuscany, one of the most developed parts of Italy.29 In remoter, less well governed areas the situation was presumably worse as far as church institutions and knowledge of doctrine was concerned. In the sixteenth century in a small place near Fano in the Marches (i.e. in the Papal States) a survey showed that 366 out of 84 members of the community had never communicated in their lives, and few knew how to make the sign of the Cross or to what it referred. Father Tacchi-Venturi, S.J., from whose book this information is derived, also relates how the Jesuits regarded the moral and religious barbarism as worst in the

kingdom of Naples, in the Abruzzi, Apulia and Calabria – calling it Indù italiana, the 'India of Italy', a land, very near Rome, that awaited conversion.30

As I have said, one must not automatically assume that matters were worse in Italy than elsewhere. One must also steer carefully between an imaginary world of good Christians after Trent and Reformation had done their work, and the other imaginary world of some earlier more idyllic period – a golden Middle Age. These assumptions are surely equally wrong. Italian ignorance and superstition, if they seem more noticeable than in northern Europe, may be so at any rate in large measure because much of the peninsula is mountainous and difficult of access, and was (still is) politically divided, culminating in terrible wars and the cruel invasion of foreign armies. After Trent nothing changed dramatically: the Reformation (in both Roman Catholic and Protestant areas) was to come in the nineteenth century, apart from dogmatic quarrels and dogmatic definitions. As for the illusion that there had once been a time of maypole innocence, this recedes backwards in time as one tries to grasp it. It is an evanescent as the yeomen of England – and perhaps not entirely unrelated to that bit of fustian idealism.

Not must we forget that the old tradition of atheism in the Italy of the quattrocento does not stand up to scrutiny.31 There were wicked men, and there were many men who were both evil-livers and blasphemous as well. Their deeds are occasionally chronicled in the novels and in the court proceedings – like that terrible Tuscan who was beheaded in 1415 after a career which twice involved incest and culminated in his slashing a picture of the Virgin.32 And up and down the peninsula there was rumbling anticlericalism. This was frequently produced by the financial relations of clergy and laity, both in the clergy trying to levy tithe in its various forms, mortuary fees and other church taxes condoned by tradition but usually uncanonical; and it was exacerbated by attempts of the clergy to evade their share of direct taxation in some of the bigger states, as they did all over Europe. It may be added incidentally that Professor Elio Conti has somewhat surprisingly shown that in the Florentine contado more land was held by the church at the end than at the beginning of the fifteenth century – and this may have added to public frustration.33 The privilegium fori also raised passions from time to time, as did the activities of the papal Inquisition, an institution from which northern Europe was mercifully almost free. On the other hand (and not, we may presume, as a result of the activity of the Inquisition) there was very little heresy in
Italy. There was no Wycliffe, no Huss. There were a handful of lonely Fraticelli, some of whom became infected with Joachimites views. If in many ways the Italian laity were ignorant of traditional religion, the persecution of the Waldensians went on fitfully. Pico della Mirandola and Savonarola ran into trouble with Pope Alexander VI, but the former made his submission and the latter was regarded at the time by many and by far more people today not as a heretic but as a saint. In another way they displayed remarkably lively religious convictions: the proliferation of lay confraternities. This is a field much cultivated in recent years but there is no adequate and up-to-date survey of the whole question, let alone of the Italian side of it. It appears to be certain that we are faced with a very ancient impulse, festive, penitential, charitable, whose origins will always defeat precise investigation. There is not much doubt that religious sentiment — using the phrase in its largest sense — came before economic aims in the evolution of the craft guilds of Florence and of Italy. It is the clubbable part of man, and the part of him that longs for demonstrations of collective joy and collective devotion, for the outward manifestation of solidarity, neighbourliness, vicinanza, in processions and pageants, in the high moments of birth, destitution and death. Therefore it may not be helpful to make the distinctions recently attempted between confraternities of discipline, of charitable works, of liturgical observance, and so on. Most of them shared in some of all these things. Nor is it the case that confraternities were restricted to the towns or to the people of substance in the towns. They are found in villages and in country districts and they sometimes embraced the minuto popolo, as Professor Heers reminds us that they did in both Genoa and Pisa. Most commonly, at any rate in the fifteenth century, they embraced men of different social classes — men and women too, for many of these confraternities had women members though never, it is likely, allowing them to hold office. The confraternities which have attracted most attention have been, perhaps, those devoted to discipline, to flagellation. At the time such groups sprang up with mysterious rapidity — as the famous ‘Bianchi’, spreading all over north and central Italy about 1400, a product, so it is now said, of disorientation due to the Schism. Not all Bianchi groups were flagellants; all were a worry to public authority and they were forcibly excluded from Venice (despite Giovanni Dominici’s leadership) and Florence. What appears to have happened in the fifteenth century is a diminishing of the importance of public discipline; where flagellation survived in confraternities — and it did so survive until at any rate the late sixteenth century — it was normally practised in private. And in what Professor Alberigo grimly calls the storiografia flagellantesca he invites us also to observe that wild, popular and unlicensed activities, with mob inspiration, gave way gradually to episcopal or parochial controls.

Dare one venture one or two other generalisations in this difficult matter? Lay initiative seems at first to have lain behind this form of corporate organisation. There are confraternities of priests, as at Milan, where a pio consorzio sacerdotale was formed in 1460 — evidence, perhaps, that the aristocratic chapter was squeezing the clergy of the town out of their cathedral. But normally and at first the lay confraternity employs priests, or enlists priests, for liturgical purposes — for example as chanters, priests. Gradually, as noted, this tends to change and as we move on to the sixteenth century the movement becomes often more literate, composed of rather better-off people, more tied to books and to clerical organisation. Likewise there was an increase, one suspects, in the amount of energy devoted to charitable activity, to providing the funds and the services for hospitals and to relieving poverty, not least that scourge of noble poverty which afflicted a society where distressed gentlefolk were not allowed to work. But charity was by no means confined to the power vergognosi; it had enormous and beneficial consequences for the lower orders. Eugenius IV in particular gave impetus to charity in a city where the papal absence in the fourteenth century and then the Schism had virtually destroyed, for instance, Innocent III’s great institution of Santo Spirito in Sassia. Such works of mercy were, however, also popularly promoted. And sometimes one detects a moderation, a sense of measure and prudence, which might be supposed to conflict with the ardours of the spiritual life, or even with the bonhomous joys of membership of a living community. Listen to the regulations of the penitential association of S. Domenico at Bologna. They called themselves the flagellants of the saint — li Battuti di issore Santo Domenico. But their guild aimed just as much at mutual support in trouble, their ordinances display not so much divine retribution as divine love, and they aimed to hear Mass daily, to confess and communicate four times a year. As for discipline, it is clearly only one form of devotion not the norm. ‘We are men of the world’, say these canny flagellants, ‘and we have responsibility for property and families and so cannot always be occupied in the service of God like men of religion’. In one field of religious activity there is no doubt that fifteenth-century Italy was pre-eminent: preaching. The competition to get
famous preachers occupied governments all over the peninsula, especially for the Lenten sermons. It was in this field that the Dominican Observants were pre-eminent, led by S. Bernardino da Siena, and we are fortunate that a fair amount of sermon literature has survived, some of it in remarkably vivid form.66 How closely interwoven with public life such preaching could be is illustrated most dramatically perhaps by the dominant rôle played by Savonarola at Florence for a few years after the French invasion of Italy.67

We know independently of this how attentively some Florentine merchants listened to them. There are several private collections of sermons, one of which covers the years 1467-1502 and has in it only one of Savonarola’s.68 A more permanent and widespread by-product of preaching (especially that of Bernardino da Feltre) was the criticism of Jews and usury, and the establishment in nearly every big Italian town (save Venice), and in many smaller ones, of monti di pietà, official pawnshops where interest rates were rigidly controlled and where the poor could raise the wind at moments of financial crisis. By 1515 there were some 88 such places in the peninsula and a very strange little body they make – the introduction of official pawnshops depending not only on preaching and the inspiration of Christian charity but on the current availability of local small scale money-lending sources, notably by Jews.69 These monti di pietà were probably the aspect of revivalist religion which most affected humble members of society, together with charities devoted to dowries and hospitals for orphans and unwanted children.

We shall notice below that Siena was a centre of inventing a new form of idolatry in promoting the cult of the Holy Name. This emblem is still to be seen on the Palazzo Pubblico at Siena, IHS surrounded by radiating rays; his critics claimed that the symbol was widely copied in many places and attracted a worthless and unthinking veneration.70 The border-line between superstition and devotion is a fine one, and it cannot be discussed here. There is, however, plenty of evidence that a desire for a concrete contact with God was prominent in later medieval Europe and perhaps more in Italy than elsewhere.

The saints are one aspect of this and the almost universal conviction that possession of relics or prayer to a protecting saint was efficacious everywhere. Even towards the end of the sixteenth century a Venetian could assert that Venice’s true walls of defence were her saints.71 To give a relic to the Republic was an act regarded with particular favour by the State which went to extraordinary lengths both to take care of relics and acquire more.72 It is worth

stressing how large a part ‘religion’ played in the life of the cynical and hard-boiled merchant patricians and citizens; the doge had a ‘sacred rôle’, was princeps in republica and princeps in ecclesia; foreign observers were surprised that Venice’s attitude to the church private in the sixteenth century was not based solely on raison d’état.73 At the other end of the peninsula the mid-fifteenth century saw the culmination of the cult of S. Gennaro at Naples, with the miracle, frequently repeated, of the liquefying blood.74 None of these features of popular religion were new. But it is important that we remember there was a persistent need of outlets for emotion of this kind and that – while it was in some sense devotion of a limited sort – the church had to come to terms with it.

Processions and propitiations, for good weather, against the plague, and in time of war are found everywhere, and everywhere with official sanction and organisation – a very good example being the Florentine cult of S. Maria Impruneta. Impruneta is a small town to the south of the city and at moments of crisis the picture of the Madonna there, regarded as painted by St Luke, was paraded; and the authorities and private benefactors lavished embellishments on the church throughout the quattrocento.75 Similar ceremonies, involving the whole population, took place in every Italian town (and, of course, in many towns all over Christendom).

In popular religion Mary figured with particular prominence. The Ave Maria, formalised in the Rosary (especially associated with the Dominicans) and the Angelus, when the bells remind the faithful of the Virgin at dawn, midday and dusk, reached their full development in the fifteenth century and were especially cultivated in Italy.76 With this went, of course, the ancient habit of crossing oneself, the kiss of Peace and the Pax – the metal or wooden cross on a handle which was passed among the congregation at high mass (this mainly, under Franciscan inspiration),77 and the Agnus Dei, an impression of the Lamb and Flag (or other representation of the Cross) on wax, and blessed by the pope; Martin V undertook to consecrate the wax tablets every seventh year of his pontificate.78 Mass itself had acquired this concrete aspect. The elevation of the elements enabled men to see Christ;79 the pyx or the Tabernacle, with its light, told men and women who entered a church that they were in the house of God.

It is extraordinarily difficult to disentangle devotion from magic in observances of this kind; as noted earlier, the Jesuits in sixteenth-century Italy found ‘Christians’ crossing themselves but ignorant of what the Cross represented.80 Nor can we begin to calculate the
proportions of vulgar entertainment and biblical instruction in the Sacre rappresentazioni, as the religious dramas, which developed from the earlier Laude, were called in Italy — the mystery or miracle or Passion plays of northern usage. S. Bernardino da Siena argued that it was better (if the choice were open) to go to a sermon than to attend mass and presumably he was an acute observer of a visit to a service as a kind of perfunctory precaution. On the other hand some preachers were alleged to use all the tricks of mountebanks to attract audiences — not only choosing scabrous subjects on which to talk but clowning in the full sense of the term — like the friar supposed to have preached in the nude at Angagni and the Milanese preacher of the Crusade who suddenly revealed armour under his habit: both cases were Franciscans, and it goes without saying that similar gimmicks are noted north of the Alps. A good preacher had to be entertaining and entertainment was all that some of them attained.

That the more exaggerated forms of discipline were regarded with suspicion because they did excite the mob seems certain. Civic authorities were prepared for confraternalities, and even (though unwillingly) for the high class group which met secretly at night, and thus offered opportunities for conspiracy of a political kind. But the flagellation of the Bianchi was another matter, and, as we have already observed, both Venice and Florence banned the hysterical mobs which arose so alarmingly and spontaneously at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth century.

Popular heresy as found in the north was almost unknown in quattrocento Italy, as we have already noted, and the only real problem was posed by the popularity of the Speculum animarum simplicium, attributed to Marguerite Porrete (Miroir des simples âmes). Marguerite Porrete had been condemned and burned as a heretic in 1310, and there is much debate whether the wide diffusion of the doctrine that God = Perfect Freedom was in any sense directly derived from her (given the sound biblical foundations for the belief) and whether, even in the fourteenth century, there was any organisation which could reasonably be described as a sect. What there is no doubt of is that the book itself had become almost bedside reading among Italians (and other) mystics, and in Italy was particularly favoured by the members of the Gesuati Order and associated with Venice. In 1433 the chapter-general of the Benedictine Congregation of Sa Giustina prohibited monks from reading the book and it was condemned by Bernardino, Giovanni Capestrano and Giacomo della Marca; in 1437 Eugenius IV ordered an enquiry into