THE QUALITY OF ITALIAN RELIGIOUS LIFE. REFORM

Pre-Reformation reform has been much studied in recent years — almost the sole aspect of church life that has been given extensive treatment in later medieval Italy. This is not least, one suspects, because recent changes in the Roman Catholic Church have stressed popular religious movements or the popular element in religious change. Just as conciliarism is now in favour with many highly-placed ecclesiastics (though by no means all), so confraternities of all sorts, charitable activities of all sorts, the church seen as an element in the social situation in which all men were involved, has led to movements being studied which have been somewhat neglected before, and to a new interest in heretics, especially those Italian heretics who survived the shock waves from the north after the 1520s.

With these last this book is not concerned. But I believe it to be helpful to study the question of reform beginning with reform from below because it provides a useful yardstick for comparison with reform from above. By reform from below I mean the efforts of clergy (of all kinds and up to the bishop and even the cardinal) and the laity (again of all kinds from burgess to prince). By reform from above I mean attempts by councils and popes to identify causes of decline and devise means of recovery. Even that sometimes has an inbuilt assumption that things spiritual and ecclesiastical were in a more parlous condition than they had been. Is this true? We know enough of the early centuries of the Christian era to say with conviction that religion down to the eleventh or twelfth century produced more sinners than saints, at any rate in the public record, which is all we have to go on. It would, we may suspect, be erroneous to suppose that, because literacy was rising in the thirteenth century among many clergy men and laymen, because for a moment here and there the magic of the poverello of Assisi touched many hearts, that overall the quality of religion was fundamentally affected for long for the vast majority. Ignorant and incontinent priests (and

soon even friars) are plentiful, and if universities produced theological giants and lawyers by the score, they also encouraged pluralism since a benefice was the easiest way of supporting a boy at school, his spiritual duties (which in any case he was too young to perform) being undertaken by some underpaid, ill-educated curate. Thus it pays to be cautious in talking about ‘reform’ prior to the Reformation, Protestant and Catholic, when a brief attempt was made to achieve the purity of the primitive church, or at any rate this was regarded as the aim with the top priority.

With these reservations I turn now to reform ‘from below’.

Reform from below

There were certainly plenty of reformers in fifteenth-century Italy and plenty of movements of reform, if by that we mean group organisations trying to make permanent a higher standard of moral and religious behaviour. Such groups display certain common characteristics. They are found among the laity as well as among the clergy.

I have already mentioned1 that the regulars all developed observant or quasi-observant movements in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, designed ‘strictly’ to adhere to the rule. That strictness should not be taken to mean the full rigour of — let us say — early Franciscan life; St Francis would, one suspects, have been hard put to it to distinguish between the Conventuals and the Observants of the fifteenth century. The arguments between the two Franciscan wings, exacerbated by the Schism, turned on the relative claims of poverty on the one hand and obedience to the various papally-approved revivals of the rule on the other. The level of observance aimed at has neatly been expressed by a recent historian of the order as observance of the rule ‘as interpreted by each generation’.2 I mention the Franciscans first because their troubles were so stormy, their divisions so profound that they culminated in Leo X’s division of the order into two orders in 1517, primacy going to the Observants; and partly because the tensions were experienced more in Italy than elsewhere, despite the attempts of saints and reformers like Bernadino and Giovanni Capestrano and also of popes to paper over the widening cracks. What made the whole business particularly absurd was the popular respect which the Observants rapidly acquired, which loaded them with buildings and income and all the trappings to which the Conventuals had allegedly succumbed. But this is hindsight. All sides in these disputes, we may note, shared a
common loathing of the few surviving Fraticelli, who were more or less obliterated by the late 1460s.¹

The Franciscan upheavals are well known. Similar problems arose among other orders of friars, and again seem to have been particularly acute in Italy. All of these cannot be described in any detail but we may glance briefly at the other three large orders – Dominicans, Augustinians and Carmelites. The vicissitudes of the Dominicans, already alluded to, have been well outlined in an admirable paper by the Dominican Fathers R. Creyten and A. D'Amato.¹ The story bears striking resemblances to the troubles of the Franciscans and, as with them, papal intervention produced no effective results (on this see below pp. 89–90). We have a succession of ministers-general with different views, vicars-general elected by Observants and one group after another successfully upsetting papal and capitular decisions. The main difference in the Dominicans' division was that, despite the existence of reformed and unformed houses, in the end the reforming wing, the so-called 'Lombard Congregation'¹ had dominated most of Italy, and in the final upshot the order was not divided – as the Franciscans in effect were by the mid-sixteenth century – into four. There remains one Dominican order, although the storms in it were not over in 1532. The Augustinian Hermits' observance, organised by Congregation, was also a relatively peaceful affair starting in the convent at Lecce in Tuscany but ending up (in Italy) as five Congregations of reformed houses; the reform does not seem to have been very profound, the impetus dying down by the end of the fifteenth century.¹ The Carmelites also survived on a congregational basis, the first Observant group being approved in 1442.¹

But monks too attempted reform and so did the regular canons, so noticeable a feature of Italian church life. Among monks and regular canons – there is really little at this late stage to distinguish between them – three particularly noxious corruptions complicated the task of improvement: the commendam, the appointment of conventual superiors ad vitam, and poverty – not the theory, the reality. To these disabilities should be added exemption from the ordinary and therefore lack of supervision, although really determined bishops had no difficulty in getting letters from the pope suspending exemption and granting plenary powers. Few bishops asked for this but that was the fault of the bishops more than of the peccant monks. The commendam was an old way of transferring income from a convent to someone who had the title of abbot or prior but who did not in effect occupy the office. (The word is used loosely also to apply to bishoprics granted in administrationem but I here refer only to the grant of a monastic house).¹ The evil flowing from the commendam was due to non-residence and all that that meant in careless administration, creaming off income instead of conserving resources, lack of discipline among monks, the alienation of neighbouring laity and thus added resistance to paying rents, let alone adding fresh endowments: hence further poverty – the downward spiral is self-evident. But it was possible to reverse this process, and there are several cases (one example was the grant in commendam to Ludovico Barbo of the derelict house of S. Giorgio in Alga from which was to stem both the Paduan Congregation of S. Giustina and the Order of Lateran Canons) where a virtuous commendator actually initiated reform. Unhappily such men were rare. The commendator was often highly placed and very unwilling to listen to reformers. He was often a cardinal, for cardinals were not bound by the normal limitations on plunders. Ambrogio Traversari had a particular loathing for Antonino Correr, the Venetian cardinal of Bologna who would only surrender an abbey against a substantial pension, 'and let him go with it' writes the future beatus, 'into hell'.¹ The size of the bite taken by Italian cardinals out of Italian conventual income remains to be investigated but as one turns the pages of the Vatican Archive series Resignations (which runs from 1458 to 1514), one is struck by the bulk of the Italian material. And as time went on it may be suspected that Italians contrived by various devices to replace their foreign commendams (for instance those in Germany) with ones nearer at hand, less likely to go by default. The reformers, like Ambrogio or later on those other Camaldolese hermits Giustiniani and Quirini, attacked the commendam, but grants were to flow from a more or less powerless papacy for many years to come.

A more immediate step to improve monastic discipline was felt to be some to the removal of superiors whose appointment, being for life, led them to treat the property and the members of the convent rather like the improvident beneficiaries of an entail – indeed, with regress and resignatio in favorem some houses, like some bishoprics, really were entailed among the males of certain families, and not always among the males lawfully begotten, for legitimacy was one of the particular commendam powers. In addition, of course, had in general avoided life appointments by having regular elections at each centre, although it might be an embarrassment with ministers who sometimes clung to their posts; the fifteenth century saw many attempts in other regular orders to have short term, elective abbacies and priories; so to arrange things that officials moved from one
house to another; to make the chapter-general a feature of all regular communities, and not just among the friars and one or two benedictine-based orders such as the Carthusians, Cistercians and Camaldolites.

The device by which these changes were affected was the 'Congregation', that is, a group of houses having the same reform programme and permitted to cut themselves off to some degree from any larger association. This arrangement might be fairly easily attained by Benedictines and by the regular canons, which had never (despite some papal prompting) developed a corporate existence comparable to that of the friars, who had remained either under episcopal control or directly under the pope (exempt). Hence we find that the famous house of Santa Giusta in Padua, reformed by the Venetian Ludovico Barbo, was recognised by Martin V in 1419 as the centre of a Congregation of four houses. Barbo's re-establishment of Benedictinism of a purer kind in houses in Genoa, Florence, Venice and Padua was only the first stage in a more complicated development springing from Barbo's zealous monks were invited into decaying but earnestly penitent convents and effected reform without the convent itself joining the Congregation; but by the time Barbo died as bishop of Treviso, in 1443, there were 16 great monasteries formally united, including the great and rejuvenated house of San Paolo Fuori le Mura at Rome. Later stages in this Benedictine revival culminated in the union of a number of convents which gave its name to a Congregation in the early sixteenth century. We must again remind ourselves that we are not here witnessing a reversion to anything remotely like monasticism. Barbo's monks, for example, slept in separate cells and one of his recent biographers, also a Benedictine, regards this as an important step towards spirituality. It probably was, but it was a step away from earlier corporate life and a recognition of what had already happened everywhere else in western Christendom. If it was relatively simple for zealous monks to organise in Congregations, similar arrangements were often a reflection of unhappy rivalry among the friars. The Franciscan divisions and sub-divisions tell their own story, with no help needed from the Congregational idea. I have already referred to the Lombard Congregation of reformed Dominicans which in effect took form when a few reformed Dominican houses were put under Giovanni Dominici as vicar-general in 1393. The whole of the fifteenth century was not sufficient for the ensuing controversies. I shall refer to the story in a moment. Meanwhile it is fair to summarise it by saying that until the 1530s

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reformed Italian Dominicans were grouped under a vicar-general and that the Lombard Congregation was something of a misnomer since their houses covered the peninsula; in the 1490s by invitation of the king they introduced reform in the Regno at much the same time that Savonarola and the Florentine signoria were trying to form a separate observant Dominican Congregation for Tuscany, being fearful (as noted above) that 'Lombard' Dominicans would be agents for the Sforza rulers of Milan. Moreover the flexible structure of the Congregation could shelter a nascent order. This is what happened with the remarkable development of the Lateran Canons. This company began as a curious mixture of Tuscan decay and Venetian enterprise. The regular canons at Sa Maria di Fregionia (near Lucca) had sunk in 1401 to one professed member; it was to this derelict convent that Leone Gherardini, prior of the canons of Padua, went - knowing its state - in order to lead a life of observance. Gherardini came from the same spiritual background as Ludovico Barbo, who had reformed the Benedictine Congregation of Sa Giusta in Padua - a Venetian world of patriotic piety. In ten years Sa Maria was flourishing and the main danger to the revived community was that it was constantly depleted by sending its canons to undertake reform elsewhere. In 1421 there were eleven houses in what was recognised by Martin V as a Congregation. The constitutions then established remained basic thereafter. They were worth rehearsing since they clearly reflect attempts to solve contemporary difficulties:

1. An annual chapter-general (or if necessary at an interval of not more than 3 years); this was the sovereign body.
2. The rector-general and other officials were to be elected annually but could not hold office for more than 3 years at a time.
3. Any canon transferred from one house to another belonged to the second as though he had made profession in it.
4. The chapter-general might receive other houses into the congregation or construct new houses. Subsequently (1453) it was established that
5. There should be complete individual poverty.
6. The chapter should consist of rectors, socii and priors (the socii, who were not to be priors, were to assist the rector).
7. There should be annual visitations.
8. The rector's office was to last only for a year; he was then ineligible for 2 years. In certain houses the superior might be called an abbot, but he was still limited in tenure of office.
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These members of the Congregation at first called of Sa Maria di Fregionalna got their name of Lateran Canons when Eugenius IV (before he was driven from Rome) and again in 1439 (when he had returned to Rome) handed over to the Congregation the basilica of St John Lateran in Rome. It is hard to know whether this move was displeased by the existing secular canons of the Lateran or by the northerners to whom the pope was handing over the basilica; the latter disliked Rome, its immorality, its unhealthy climate, its business; the sitting tenants, so to speak, regarded the incomers as foreign (i.e. non-Roman) intruders. It will be necessary to return later to this curious story. At the moment it is enough to note that, although they failed in the end to establish themselves in the Lateran they were in the end to be known as Lateran Canons. This new corporation had some 39 houses by 1435 and was to play an important part in the dissemination of Lutheran ideas in Italy. Once again let us remember that its structure was not that observed by what were called dei Toni ani during the twelfth century. All sorts of differences can be observed: while the dietary regimen was at first austere and there was corporative flagellation, we again meet with private bedrooms and there was a firm distinction between the canons and the lay brethren, between the domini and the fratelli.

The so-called Lateran Canons were an Italian order and conformed in this national limitation to normal trends in late medieval religious activity, whether heretical or orthodox. But the other novel orders of Italy, the Minims founded in the south by S. Francesco da Paola in 1435 and confirmed by Alexander VI at the end of the century, had a more rapid expansion, to some extent transcending national frontiers as the friars had done in the thirteenth century, as the Capuchins were to do in the sixteenth. In the Minims we see some of the old austerities and the old exaltations of St Francis and his first companions.\(^{18}\)

The characteristic mark of the Catholic Reformation religious order – the regular priesthood – is absent from these manifestations, although the Lateran Canons have some of its features. But the new orders I have mentioned, as well as some among the old (to which we should add the fourteenth-century Order of Gesuati, also con-

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centuries has attracted much attention in recent years, as we have already seen, and the number of studies devoted to confraternities in Italy is very large.\(^{18}\) The aspect of such associations of laymen, especially well-to-do laymen, which must be briefly considered here is the development of confraternities – initially usually of a charitable nature – which were to culminate in the Oratory of Divine Love. It has been argued that the initial pattern should be traced back to Bergamo and the fourteenth century where the bishop took a major part in approval and control.\(^{19}\) More immediately, we find con-

fraternities in the late fifteenth century with such titles as ‘Divine Love’, ‘Name of Jesus’, ‘divina Sapienza’. There seems no doubt that the inspiration for these developments – paradoxically, because so often designed to relieve the poveri vergognosi – was from Franciscans vowed, at any rate in principle, to poverty themselves. About a dozen have so far been identified as being established between 1491 and 1497 when Bernardo da Petrel, O.F.M. (later beatified) established the Company of S. Girolamo in Vicenza; the first using the name ‘divine love’ was founded, it seems, in Genoa in 1497.\(^{20}\) The aims of these associations were all more or less the same: restricted membership (including, a priest to minister to members), late and frequent meetings (to avoid notoriety), works of mercy both corporal and spiritual, frequent and fervent prayer, mortification or discipline and more frequent confession and com-
munion – sometimes as often as four times a year.

An area of contact between priest and layman which one would like to be able to explore lies precisely in the emphasis placed on frequent confession. In the Middle Ages confession was normally an annual event preceding Easter Communion, and it seems it usually took the form of the Confessor or general confession, much as in the Anglican service today; only if a man or woman felt particularly guilty of some heinous offence, or if on the point of death, was confession heard more frequently. The encouragement to more frequent communion should probably be connected with the development in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries of a growing literature for confessors and as the layman took to reading instruc-
tions for those confessing. This literature, which may have been growing more rapid, more legalistic in the fifteenth century, is to be associated with the manuals becoming increasingly common on ‘holy living and holy dying’. The confessional, as an enclosed and private place, is a post-Tridentine invention, but confession as systematic soul-searching was beginning to be a more regular feature of religion. In Italy the great name in this field was that of S. Antonino of
Florence who wrote three short works (on cases of conscience and the confessional) which are in a sense preparatory to his great *Summa theologica*; he was also much consulted on doubtful cases.  

This mixture of laity and clergy in confraternities, with the laity playing the leading rôle, did undoubtedly do a good deal not only to encourage confession and communion but, in larger ways, to bridge the gap between clergy and laity which had always been immense and perhaps had become even more oppressive as laymen became more aware of their spiritual obligations by reading the Bible, prayer books, devotional manuals of all kinds. Here one is referring, of course, to the more prosperous laymen, or those who at any rate came from a prosperous background even if they had become poor. It was from such a background that were to come the original members of the Theatines, the new order formed in 1524: the four were ecclesiastics who belonged to the Roman Oratory of Divine Love, and the new order of ‘priests-regular’ was ecclesiastical, leading on to other groups of clergy, also ‘regular’, i.e. following a rule – the Barnabites, the Jesuits, and the Oratorians established by St Philip Neri. We have thus in the sixteenth century transformation of a certain type of confraternity, the beginning of a trend towards a new type of Roman Catholic order; and a new type of spirituality which, it might be argued, appealed more to the rich than to the poor and, like so many other actions both Protestant and Roman Catholic in the sixteenth century, once again raised barriers between the priest and the people.  

Behind organisations such as these touched on here lies a generation of charitable activity by the great and – let us stress the word – the good, Caterina Fieschi Adorno (her name is a sonorous evocation of Genoese history) had been directly involved in the court of the hospital at Genoa since 1478 and became director of it in 1486. This practical element in works of charity and in the confraternities, referred to in the previous chapter, formed a very important constituent in Italian religious sensibility in the century before the Reformation. From it was to stem an interest in the catechism and devotion to the Eucharist.  

Caterina Fieschi Adorno was canonised, but not until 1737. A more immediately appealing type of saint in our period was undoubtedly still the great preacher – the great Observant evangelist Bernardino, who died in 1444 and who was canonised five years later. If from Pastor’s list of Italian saints between 1400 and 1520 we subtract the layfolk (27) and nuns (10) we are left with 49 who had obtained beatification or canonisation by the time Pastor wrote

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this volume: of these 17 were Franciscans, 15 were Dominicans, 13 were other regulars, and only 4 were secular clergy – of whom there were two bishops, Niccolò Albergati and Giovanni Ravelli of Ferrara; a third, if we add in Antonino of Florence, was reckoned already as a Dominican. Much I think could be done by examining the lives of the officially-recognised beatiti and of the many more (one thinks of Savonarola) who attracted a local cult. At the moment, however, I propose to turn to bishops. The heroic days of bishop-martyrs were over, indeed, and especially in over-bishops, absentee-ridden Italy. That 2 per cent of Italian saints in the sixteenth century were bishops suggests that at any rate a fair proportion were men of worth.

Some indeed there were who were admirable pastors and not least Albergati, whose election by the clergy and people of Bologna in 1417 was described before (pp. 12–13). He was a Carthusian, visited his diocese, held synods, besides being a careful manager of the episcopal lands, a supporter of reform (he introduced the Lateran Canons to Bologna, did his best to support the Gesuati and so on). But two activities in particular deserve to be stressed: he founded a confraternity, composed of clergy and ‘noble citizens’ to teach children a catechism. And he instituted a seminary for priests. Little seems to be known about this seminary; but then (apart from Guarino and Vittorino, the two heroes of teaching) hardly any work has been done on practical educational history at this time in Italy, although plenty has been written on the easier topic of the theorists. We must not therefore suppose that Albergati’s seminary was necessarily ineffective. We do know that the seminary for 12 poor clerks founded by the bishop of Tortona in 1435 had folded up by 1450. We hear of seminaries at Perugia in the mid-fourteenth century, founded by Cardinal Niccolò Capocci and termed the ‘vecchia sapienza’, and another cardinal, Branda Castiglione, is stated to have founded one at Pavia early in the fifteenth century. And we have seen that the odd cathedral had or was compelled to establish one of the canons as scholasticus. But the continuous story of this side of reform dates, I believe, from the Roman foundations of Cardinals Capranica and Cardinali towards the end of the century. Capranica’s will is dated 1458, the year of his death. The college for 32 poor students destined for the priesthood did not open till 1475. Capranica made very careful and elaborate provisions for the government of his college which was intended to train half the scholars in theology and half in canon law – a neat balance between the contemplative and the active life; the governors were, significantly
enough, laymen — the conservatori who (under papal management) ran the city of Rome.68 Nardini’s college for 20 poor students opened its doors four years after his death in 1484; this lasted until the eighteenth century and the building stands, adjoining Nardini’s Palace which became the Vecchio Governo.69 Both of these colleges thus significantly antedate the ineffective attempts of Leo X to put some life (and theology) into the decrepit Roman university, the Sapienza, and both were destined for a long and useful life. Indeed the Collegio Capranica is still in operation – next door to the cinema of the same name in the piazza onomina, as the guide books say.

The reforms of prelates like these are paralleled, among the laity, by the fitful but powerful operations of princes. It was Caulton’s constant refrain that reform could only come when the reformer had the prince behind him, with the coercive force necessary to effect change.70 And there is much truth in this, although the Italian princes, like their trans-Alpine opposite numbers, were capricious in their choice of men and movements and often possessive towards the objects of their sympathy.71 It is incontrovertible that laymen still admired austerity among the religious and that powerful laymen protected and endowed convents which they regarded as virtuous – the Lateran Canons, the Franciscan Observants, the Minims. Hardly a princely family in Italy but has its honoured place among favourites of some exponents of religious zeal. They need not be catalogued here. It must, however, not be overlooked that the prince sometimes wanted to be repaid here below as well as in Heaven. For instance the Gonzaga family supported reformed Franciscans at Mantua, but expected instant obedience; they were not used to their Franciscan chaplains being bothered with conventual business.72 In Milan Visconti and Sforza rulers arbitrated in the affairs of the friars in Lombardy; it was impossible to hold a chapter there without the benevolence of the prince. The Este family were no different in the territories of Ferrara73 nor the Aragonese in Naples.74 Though these Italian princes wielded much less power than kings of England or France, they pursued similarly drastic policies. Could one rely on the true reforming instincts of a ruler like Giovanni Maria Visconti who, in 1455, directed that the word pax must be dropped from the Mass to be replaced by the less seditious word tranquillar?75

Reform from above

In the foregoing we have ascended high, but there is an even higher authority from which reform of the Italian clergy might have flowed

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– the papacy, where responsibilities were, it is true, far wider than the mere provinces of Italy, but who were (as I have argued) circumscribed by italiani in the fifteenth century.

Perhaps one should in fairness begin not with the pope but with the councils, whose programmes they so successfully frustrated at the time. Professor Alberigo has studied the role of Italian bishops at the early sessions of the Council of Trent.76 There seems to be no comparable work covering the councils of the first half of the fifteenth century. It is one’s impression, however, that both at Constance and Basel Italian reformers as such were not of much significance. At Constance the Italians were distracted by the rivalries of the two Italian popes John XXIII and Gregory XII and (unlike the French or the English or the Castilians) had subsequently no one strong prince to protect them from the facility of the re-established papacy. At Basel, though Haller has printed some petitions by a reforming Italia Benedicite,77 politics predominated throughout and the prelates from Italy attended at the will of their rulers, mostly to embarrass Eugenius IV. Duke Filippo Maria Visconti of Milan ordered prelates in his territories to attend Basel, as a lever against the pope, accepting a rôle as ‘ecclesiastical vicar for Italy’.78 The Aragonese had Niccolò de’ Tudeschi, Panormitanus, one of the leading canonists of his day, playing for time at the council in order to drive the pope to accept the new régime being established in the Regno.79 When it came to the election of Felix V in 1439, supreme moment of conciliar crisis, the only ‘Italians’ to be found to take part (for, as at Constance, so at Basel, the ‘nations’ participated indeed only one cardinal was present) came exclusively from Piedmont and Savoy.80 In the event, as Paolo Sarpi shrewdly observed in his Trattato delle materie beneficiari, the conciliar legislation of Basel was not received in Italy as it was in France and Germany.81 If it was not received in a formal way, Italian powers, like governments elsewhere in Europe, did not forget the decree Frequenti, and ten year councils. During Calixtus III’s stormy dealings with Alfonso V of Aragon the king threatened to depose the pope at the future council,82 and the Milanese ambassador in 1455 told the pope that if he dared to excommunicate the duke, Italian governments would adopt the terms of the Pragmatic Sanction of Bruges (i.e. the antipapal legislation of Basel).83 Sforza clearly regarded the behaviour of Eugenius and other popes as the betrayal of an ancient convention. He had no desire to alter the former arrangement:

We will not be deprived of rights, nor damaged, nor be trampled on by
these clerical bosses, with their insatiable appetite which is not satisfied with spiritual income only but demands also the temporal. We have never accepted such practices but have continued in the way of the Visconti our predecessors; and so have done and still do many princes big and little everywhere in Italy.\(^\text{48}\)

One feels for a moment back in the days of Gregory VII and Henry IV, when the papacy in the eleventh century suddenly tried to change the accepted rules.

It has already been observed, however, that the papal power now depended on control of the Papal States as never before (above p. 38). And popes were also vulnerable to cardinals, not unwilling to remind the pope of Constance and Basel - and indeed the power of cardinals in certain circumstances to call a council had achieved a kind of orthodoxy by the end of the seventeenth century, when it was no longer needed.\(^\text{44}\) But (especially with the backing of the larger powers), some cardinals could call a council and did in 1511 when the conciliaulum met at Pisa. The interest of this episode is not in the political intrigues that lay behind it, but the fact that it prompted the pope to convene a 'true' or ecumenical council, which met at the Lateran from 1512 to 1517. Summoned by Julius II (18 July 1511) it was really Leo X's responsibility and recently considerable work has been done on its activities. Lateran V may not have been as Italian as its composition as used to be thought,\(^\text{46}\) but there is no doubt that the reform proposals put before it were mainly by Italians,\(^\text{46}\) and notably by the two Camaldolese monks, Paolo Giustiniani and Pietro Quirini.

These Venetian scholar-hermits saw the pope as the sole hope of reform; a quarter of the 'Libellus', violently radical as it is in many other ways, is devoted to an exaltation of the papal office. This extraordinary work of 1511 (to which reference has already been made regarding the literacy of the clergy and the importance of benefices in ordination)\(^\text{44}\) extends its aims to the whole world: Jews and idolaters are to be converted, Moslems are to be converted if necessary by force; all Christian princes should be at peace with one another; all Christian communities in 'Africen et Asiâ regiones' are to be united to 'omnes Europæ Christianæ'. But it is Italy that these Venetians knew best and which is in the forefront of their speculations, despite their in-built consciousness of the Greek world and the far east. Peace among Christians (for example) would particularly benefit Italy. They then attack ignorantia (as has been observed) and their drastic remedy is the prohibition of the use of modern authors; and such writings should be submitted in advance for papal approval. The Bible should replace the orators and poets of antiquity: priests should be prepared for pastoral duties, the jungle of the Canon Law should be simplified (as it was to be by 1917-18). We want docti not doctores, they exclaim, in an Erasmian aside: morals are what matter not cleverness. The Bible should be translated in an official version, superstitious practices (e.g. prayers to special saints for relief of special complaints) should be discouraged. Diversity of church services should be replaced by a unified and simple liturgy. There should be only one lot of monks and so with other religious; stupid quarrels on the Conception of the B.V.M. should end. The hierarchy should be pure and active, of good birth and good morals. The pope must be an example to all princes.

A summary, however, does not do justice to this vehement document which ends with a personal appeal to Leo X. It may be added that it was pope and council to whom they appealed and that their 'Libellus' advocated general councils every five years, not the ten of the Constance decree Frequens re-enacted at Basel.\(^\text{44}\)

This conviction that pope and council were the only instruments of reform is less surprising, perhaps, in Venetians than it might have been among other Italians. I have hinted already more than once at the strong Venetian strain in Italian reform and this applies to reforming popes, if that is not too strong an expression to cover Gregory XIII (Correr), Eugenius IV (Condulm), and Paul II (Barbo), all of whom were cousins or half-cousins. Gregory made cardinal the future Eugenius and Eugenius promoted the future Paul. But their connection with a revived spiritual life in Italy goes far beyond the selection of some good cardinals from their many cousins (they also selected some shockers). It was Gregory XII whose nephews, with his encouragement, began that religious revival at S. Giorgio in Alga which was to lead both to the Lateran Canons and the Benedictine reformed congregation of Sa Giustina at Padua (above p. 76). Eugenius's interventions on the side of reform are far too many to list and his efforts are all the more remarkable if one recalls he was for ten years an exile in Florence and the victim of the criticism of the Fathers at Basel who ultimately tried to depose him. The Lateran Canons, Camaldoli, the reformed Friars, all enlisted Eugenius's help; like others he tried to give Rome a decent university; his mandates of a reforming kind in various dioceses of Italy remain to be collected. As for Paul II his reputation as a zealot used to rest on his dissolution of the College of Abbreviators, a meritorious act which roused the ire of Platina, whom the pope also had tortured as a suspected revolutionary. Platina undoubtedly exaggerated the
hatred of Paul for the new learning and the humanists. But he too was active in furthering the interests of, for instance, both the Lateran Canons and the Dominicans. I do not mean that other popes of the period were uninterested in reform; only that there is a connection worth investigating between reforming currents and the aspirations of Venice, which in fact persisted well into the sixteenth century. In fact the popes I have just mentioned did not address themselves expressly to the problem of reform as much as did Pius II, Sixtus IV, and — in a brief moment of repentance — Alexander VI.

Pius II's reform commission, appointed as soon as he became pope, was directed partly at securing an aggressive policy for Christendom against the Turk, and partly the reform of the Roman court. Of the memorials left from this episode (the details of it still seem somewhat obscure) there are memoranda by Nicolas of Cusa and Domenico de' Domenichii; and a draft bull by the pope himself. Cusa's proposals are extremely interesting but they are addressed, as was proper in a non-Italian, to a general reform of the whole church and I will not discuss them. Domenichii was a Venetian, let us note in passing, and had for years taught philosophy at Padua. He was very hostile to the pomp surrounding the papal pontificates and in his book De dignitate episcopali produced 34 reasons why they should not be accorded precedence over bishops. He was, in short, a conservative, in the good old Venetian way. His suggestions for reform of the curia are therefore all the more telling. They are pretty sweeping; luxury and nepotism are condemned among popes; cardinals should lead simple lives and have no jewels and gold plate; bishops should be compelled to reside; papal officials, especially members of the rota, should have salaries paid regularly and not live on perquisites; simony should be rooted out of the papal chancery. Some small reforms were actually enacted by Pius but the great bull of reform Pastor aeternus, drafted in the summer of 1464, was never promulgated.

Pastor prints a summary and paraphrase in an appendix to his account of Pius II and, apart from the Pope's assertion of good intentions in regard to his own life and in the selection and wealth of cardinals (Pius's promotions were not to exceed 20 servants, older cardinals not more than 60), the bull is almost entirely restricted to tightening up and slightly rearranging the details — especially those affecting finance — in the traditional administration of the curia; it is a reform mainly of executive procedures. Much the same might be said of Sixtus IV's Quoniam regnantium cura which also made grand denunciations of abuses and then proceeded to proposals for minor alterations in the work of referendaries, secretaries and so forth. This bull in any case also remained unpublished. Tangl prints portions of these documents among the 'Reformationes' in his collection of Kanzleidrehungen; he might just as well have put them with his 'Constitutiones', which they resemble save that many of the constitutions were merely ineffectual while the reforms were still-born.

Of all these gestures the most surprising is that of Alexander VI. His devotion to reform was a convulsive reaction to the murder of his son the duke of Gandia in June 1497, in the interval before the pope a year later transferred his ambitions to a secular career for Cesare Borgia, released from being a cardinal in August 1498. The grief-stricken pope appointed a very powerful commission, comprising six cardinals, two bishops, two priests and two deacons. Their papers have survived, rather moving in their way, a typical collection of somewhat messy working documents, submissions by officials, notes by the members of the commission, drafts of reports, copies of earlier attempts at reform, the earlier drafts, such as Sixtus IV's Quoniam regnantium cura brought out and dusted. The affair has usefully been discussed by Léonce Célier. What strikes one is the hunt for precedents, not least among election capitulations and from the drafts already mentioned of previous bulls. These cardinals, and the high curial officials advising them, were sober and serious men, far from desiring revolutionary changes and they proposed none. The draft bull begins by the pope referring to his early impulses to reform and blames the French invasions for their postponement. The projected reform then turns to the trivial details of the official adjustments which by now had in practice come to be equated with reform. Pastor promised an edition of the whole document, but did not produce it, I think. Tangl gives the sections covering the chancery and the other non-financial departments of the curia.

It is important that nothing was proposed to be done about the reverenda camera apostolica, although much evidence was submitted on it. It is, of course, even more important that absolutely no attention whatever is paid to expectatives, commendams, compositions, sale of offices, and all the corrupt and debilitating devices which were now so regularly depended on as sources of income, as sources of papal influence, especially in Italy itself. Even if the bull had been published and the curia had had its way, virtually nothing would have changed.

One might conclude that reform of such a kind would hardly have stilled criticism among the clerical and lay rank and file of the
church. Indeed by introducing fresh financial stringency it might have irritated men further by a papacy which was not only venal but also efficient. These three draft bulls are, goodness knows, mild enough but the innocuousness is due to Pius, Sixtus and Alexander being unwilling to disturb the accustomed pattern of curial administration, unwilling to stand up to the upper ranks of their own bureaucracy. The possessor of the keys, the vicar of Christ, whose plenitude of power was so often invoked by the clergy below him, was in practice paralysed by the machinery of his own government.

Perhaps this chapter should conclude with a brief description of the plenitude of power, to which orthodox reformers like Giustiniani and Quirini attached such importance. Undoubtedly it could do much for good as well as for evil. For example any northern scholar must admire the facility by which monasteries were transferred by papal fiat from one order to another, and sometimes to a third; and the same transformations can happen to an individual. Consider Ludovico Barbo (d. 1443), who became a regular canon of S. Giorgio in Alga and then a Benedictine monk of S. Giustina at Padua. We hear much about the bad effects of papal graces. This was one of the good effects, and there were many more. What is generally less well understood is that the papal sovereignty was anything but conclusive. The pope might undo what his predecessor had done. And even when all popes wanted the same thing they sometimes failed to make their wills prevail.

This can be neatly illustrated from the history of Dominican reform. Neatly, but not briefly. It would take too long to present even a summary that was complete, even though some salient facts in the story have been told, but the message of papal encyclicals is too important to omit. The questions at issue derived from the ambiguous nature of the relations between the reformed houses and the rest of the province. Raymond of Capua in November 1390 had envisaged the establishment of a reformed house in each province (under the Provincials) while existing Observant communities would come under the vicar-general, all under the ultimate authority of the minister-general. When Boniface IX confirmed this arrangement in January 1391 the reference to the vicar-general was omitted, and a series of battles was fought during the next century to secure the advantages from the intentions behind Boniface’s bull or from its literal terms. Popes issued documents giving the edge now to one party and now to the other. Boniface gave his support to the reformer Dominici in 1399 but then withdrew it, under pressure from the Provincials, the next year. Similar upheavals occurred in 1417, 1421, 1426, 1428. In 1436 a vicariate gave independence to the reformers for six months. Nicholas V supported reform, but issued contradictory documents under the influence of the French minister-general. Pius II’s sympathies lay with the Observants but in 1470 Paul II was persuaded to overturn all reforming legislation. These are the highlights of a tangled story which begins in 1391 and was not over a century later. In the sixteenth century the two sides were still wrangling, still getting popes to upset earlier papal decisions.

Much the same sort of capricious papal intervention can be observed when a devout bishop or patron tried to reform a church or convent: the abbot ad vitam appealed against displacement and a brief enjoined the bishop to hold his hand – there was then need for the bishop to explain to the curia the true facts of the case. Decades could pass by before the final decision.

As for the practical effects of even moderately consistent papal policy the fate of the Lateran Canons in Rome is worth pondering. It will be recalled that this order of reformed canons-regular, based on a convent near Lucca, was intimately connected with the group of Augustinians at S. Giorgio in Alga at Venice. The Venetian Eugenius IV decided to invoke the new order for the reform of the papal basilica of St John Lateran, whose secular canons were in a sad state. As noted above, the canons-regular were far from anxious to deplete their numbers by sending a missionary band to Rome in 1431. When the pope was re-established in the city, he issued a bull which confirmed the new Congregation in its privileges and ordered the secular canons to hand over the Lateran and its endowments. The fun – 50 years of it, then began. The seculars in possession of the Lateran prevaricated, whipped up local hostility to the ‘foreigners’, demanded that only Romans should enjoy Roman benefices, and staged a wild rampus in May 1440 when the old canons and the new fought over the Corpus Christi procession. It needed the castellan from S. Angelo with troops to give possession to the reformers who had been ousted by the mob. After this Eugenius allowed them to depart. In 1443 and 1446 the pope tried again without much effect. Under Nicholas V for a time the Lateran Canons (as they were now officially called) actually seem to have controlled the Lateran. In 1452 the reformed canons, trying to conduct the ceremonies surrounding the emperor Frederick III’s visit, were rudely interrupted by the old reformed chapter. The ungenerate seculars refused to hand over endowment income. The old canons had their rivals expelled in 1455 by Calixtus III – the Spaniard who was ever an enemy of innovation. The Venetian Paul II, who as
Cardinal Barbo had been protector of the Congregation, restored them to the Lateran in 1464; there were various attempts made to placate the seculars with pensions and canonries, but on Paul's death the old seculars forcibly ejected the reformed canons and Sixtus finally agreed to their eviction. In this account the swing of the pendulum has been lengthened; the goings and comings were frequent and violent in the long and tortuous story. But enough has surely been said to answer the question: who had the whip hand in these Roman transactions? Certainly not the popes who, on their own doorstep, were compelled to cede to local pressure from a handful of well-heeled clergy. However, the pope enabled the Lateran Canons to build a Roman house, the little church of Santa Maria della Pace, where twenty years later (1500–4) Bramante built them an enchanting cloister. Now the church is shut and the cloisters are rented apartments.

With these feeble exercises of the plentudo potestatis and self-defeating attempts at reform, we should perhaps link some of the crazier manifestations of contemporary religiosity. Some of these were very divisive, and led to violent debates between the friars in particular: such was the bitter dispute between Franciscans and Dominicans over the Holy Blood, Bleeding Hosts and related issues, which did nothing but bring discredit on all concerned. The cult of the liquefaction of the blood of S. Gennaro at Naples seems to have reached its apogee in the mid-fifteenth century. From such absurdities not all was loss. The feast of Corpus Christi was enhanced; and in the Vatican Stanze we have the magnificent painting by Raphael of the Miracle of the Mass at Bolsena.

The sketch given above of the Italian church and clergy was intended initially as a preparation for an examination of some of the problems posed by the emergence in Italy of novel artistic, educational and moral programmes in the decades at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century. The intention was to find answers to the questions: what did the Italian clergy make of the Renaissance? What did the Renaissance make of the clergy in Italy?

The debate about religion and its relations with the Renaissance

These are not new questions as such. Indeed the old writers were convinced that there was a simple answer, though they were not entirely agreed on what the answer was. For Burckhardt the Renaissance was the exciting if painful moment when modern man was born. And modern man was a creature of little faith; there was a strain of scepticism about the Italian humanists and their patrons which was to grow in the centuries ahead. Only a few years later Pastor took up the same theme and accepted Burckhardt's thesis – subtly expressed as it had been – treating it as a confirmation of the existence of a 'pagan' renaissance. Alongside this Pastor drew his reader's attention to the Christian renaissance – in which the artists and scholars of the quattrocento were displayed devoting their talents to the service of God, or at any rate to the service of the clergy. Pastor counted saints as a clue to the spirituality of Renaissance Italians; he counted sculptures and church architecture to establish a core of decent artistic sentiment in the wickedness of the fifteenth century; he quoted from Münz the calculation that 'the proportion of religious to classical pictures stands at about twenty to one.' Now it is easy to ridicule Pastor and his dogmatic certainties and it is impossible to dismiss the carefully qualified essay of Burckhardt. But Pastor was trying to tackle, with objectivity, exactly the question