THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

AND THE CLERGY OF ITALY IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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.1 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 displaying devoted 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 Manzì the calculation that ‘the proportion of religious to classical pictures stands at about twenty to one’.2 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

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 Sa 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 pleitudo 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, Blessing 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.
which deserves to be put to that distant age—far distant it is, although both Burckhardt and Pastor regarded it as part of the world they lived in.

One matter may be rapidly disposed of. No one can any longer accept unquestioningly the existence of that paganism which Pastor and Burckhardt saw lurking in every passe, in every solemn and unstained nude, in every classical motif; their excited reactions are still redolent of the Café Greco in its heyday, and of the northerners in Rome from Goethe onwards—Protestant or Catholic—liberated by distance from home and by the lovely wines of the Castelli, by the handsome women and the grand perspectives of the piazza, the arches and the domes. Some few sceptics there were in Renaissance Italy, but they were more than in the France of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries! It may well be doubted. And no one can regard humanist writing as anything else.

We are again face to face with Trent, and in this case with a tradition of the development of seventeenth and eighteenth-century ‘philosophy’ in northern Europe. The scholars and artists of the century before the Reformation were at one with the clergy: to confess and communicate once a year was what was socially required—and what was legally required too. Excess, such as daily mass, could not be enforced for all priests and communion as frequently as four times a year was indulged in only by a few holy women and men: a suspiciously holy lot, undependable and sometimes given to weird imaginings. The vast majority accepted Bible, services, priests, and even popes, with unquestioning fidelity but a minimum of excitement. Many people must have known about the goings on of Alexander VI: are prostitutes more discreet than other mortals? No one seems to have been especially shocked, just as everyone—given a mood of social or political excitement—seems to have found entirely appropriate the wild glories of a Joachimite kind, prophecies of joy, but chiefly prophecies of disaster.

In juxtaposing Burckhardt and Pastor I am aware of the sharpness, the over-simplified nature, of the comparison. There are, indeed, knotty questions to be faced, for there were a few clergy who elected to see danger to religion in the heady intellectualism of their day. Might one take as one’s anchor that distinction drawn by S. Antonio: ‘Scholarship should devote itself to what is righteous and proper according to reason, accepting the manner, the time and the end in view. This is studiousness; all else is idle curiosity’ (hæc... vocatur studiositas, alias vocatur curiositas). This distinction is at least as old as Bonaventure. Criticism of both learning as such is, of course, older than that. ‘Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher... all is vanity... Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh. Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man’ (Ecclesiastes i. 2, xlii. 12–17). Such condemnations echo down the ages—in Damian, in Francis, in Thomas à Kempis. Yet these sentiments are expressed in books (though this is not true of St Francis). The very argument that human learning is empty, that only leading a good life matters, has to be expressed in books or at any rate in words and if the words are eloquent they are more effective. Besides in the Bible itself are the reflections of the ethical, metaphysical and literary conventions of the Hellenistic world, ‘I am debtor to the Greeks and to the Barbarians; both to the wise and the unwise’, St Paul wrote to the Romans (i. 14).

The debate continued through the Middle Ages but the Renaissance gave it a new urgency and, once again, this was because by the fourteenth century literacy was widespread among the laity, not least in Italy. In the Middle Ages the propriety of studying the classics was a question debated of and between the clergy who, in the process of learning the Latin needed for reading the Scriptures and the liturgy, inevitably encountered pagan writers if only in scraps or in ‘moralised’ versions. Now the issue, while still felt more urgently by conscientious men of religion, affected a much wider public. The Bible in translation, widespread learning, were these not signs of grace?

But a century before such views were advanced in a sermon by Bernardino Tomitano da Feltrè (d. 1394), the answer to the availability of so much knowledge given by Giovanni Dominici was very different. The very title of his celebrated Luctula noctis was biblical: ‘the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not’ (John i. 5). In a sense the debate goes on today, its arguments affected by the methods of physical science, the Enlightenment, Marxism, existential thought. But at no point was it tense, at no moment did the outcome seem more important to scholars and men of letters, than in the fifteenth century. The scholars and men of letters were overwhelmingly clergy and overwhelmingly Italians.

Dominici’s influence was profound because it was reiterating an old criticism of the cultivation of letters, of concerning oneself with ‘fables’ and pagan ‘poetry’. Boccaccio’s De genealogia deorum had defended poetry (among its other contributions to Renaissance attitudes) and his defence was the usual one, most recently advanced by Musato: that the Bible is poetical and thus poetry has an inbuilt divinity, exercising an influence to virtue rather than vice: that the
poet turns his back on the solid gaining of wealth. In the diction of the 
Vates the word of Truth might have to be distilled; and of course there was poetry that aimed mostly to entertain or hurt. But in broad terms poetry was an inspiring study for a worthy man. This was the doctrine that had inspired Petrarch to write the Aurora and to long to read Homer in the original, and it was to justify the humanist grammar school curriculum in its first century, although all too soon the schoolmaster had forgotten why he had to take his pupils through the Aeneid or the Metamorphoses. To this humanist programme Dominici in the Lucula noctis replied (his target was Coluccio Salutati, rather than Boccaccio) that the danger outweighed any advantages. If ancient writers had sometimes glimpsed the truth, that was not what they were trying to do; and he emphasised that 'philosophy and vain deccit' (Col. ii. 8) and of the beguilement of enticing words (Col. ii. 4). 'It is more worthwhile for Christians to plough the land than to study the books of the gentiles'. Man's end was God not love of wisdom (philosophy) or fables and poetry.9 Dominici's own reading list in the Governo di cura familiare shows the limits of his tolerance of ancient literature: Cato, Aesop, Boethius, S. Augustine (in Proper of Aquainain's extracts), Prudentius, Hugh of St Victor, Theodulus's versification of the Bible. It is the sort of catalogue of books prescribed by Colet for the new St Paul's School.8

It has recently been argued that this debate was dying out by the mid-century.9 When Ermolao Barbaro, bishop of Treviso and later of Verona (d. 1471), attacked the poets in essay-letters addressed to a friar, Bartolomeo di Lendinara, he included the challenge that in antiquity no one took the poet seriously, i.e., no one thought of appointing him to public office; it was absurd to equate even Vergil and Horace with the theologians. In point of fact not all poets were condemned by the bishop. What he recommended was selective reading, and Horace and Vergil would have been allowed to pass. Barbaro was a lawyer by academic training and no mean scholar himself, so that his so-called Orationes contra poetas (c. 1450–9) deserve to be taken seriously.9 That these arguments were answered by another clergyman, indeed a regular, Timoteo Maffia a reformed Lateran Canon, with a piece entitled In sanctum rusticitatem, does not seem to me to prove that men of the church were ceasing to be troubled about the matter.10 At much this time Archbishop Antonino of Florence, friendly though he was to many humanists, took a very firm line against poetry and fables in his Summa, although his best biographer concludes that he was 'ni un adversaire ni un partisan de

I'humanisme',12 and this doubtless applied to many other pastors and men of religion. But there remained many who were qualified judges and who were unconvinced. Here again the 'Libelli' of Giustini and Quirini of 1511 may be adduced. These Camaldolese hermits, with their well-to-do Venetian patrician background, were vehement in their denunciation of the new learning. Their diatribe is too long to be quoted in full.13 But what it boils down to is that, having convicted the clergy of ignorance and lack of grammar, they go on to bewail the way the learned embrace the lies of the poets and the impurity of the philosophers, and of the way new literature had led to the neglect of the Scriptures and especially the gospels. As already mentioned, their work often has a hint of Erasmus about it and not least in the paradoxical way in which good Latin is employed to denounce the humanities.14 The fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries have a fair number of humanists who are clergy, regular and secular, by profession. Some are of high quality both as writers and as men of devout inclination. Ambrogio Traversari, who has recently appeared above as a reformer of the monks of Camaldoli, was undoubtedly such a man and has subsequently been beatified. So also was the Franciscan Alberto Iberdi da Sarteano, a pupil of Guerino and an Observant who wrote very good Latin.15 The friar, later cardinal, Giles of Viterbo is another outstanding figure both as a scholar and a reformer of the Augustinian friars.16 Later still Gasparo Contarini was a member of the devout group at Venice which, as we have seen, was so extraordinarily influential. He in the end became a cardinal, but earlier wrote De officio viri boni ac probi episcope about 1516; his impressive work seems to have been based on the episcopal activities of Pietro Barozzi, who had the see of Padua from 1487–1509.17 These men are all, in some sense, Erasians avant la lettre. Were they typical? Alongside them we should place the trite commonplaces of the friar Andrea Biglia (d. 1435), historian of Milan, critic of S. Bernardino, propagandist for the Augustinian tradition that Augustine himself organised the Augustinians in Tuscany.18 Another medico figure, despite his good Latin, was Ermolao Barbaro (d. 1493), better at getting on in the world of the church than inspiring it.19 His contemporary, the Lateran Canon Matteo Bosso of Verona, is to be judged (according to himself) by his sermons rather than by his writings which display, it seems, little fervour or originality; he assiduously assembled his own epistolario, which does not seem to have had much influence.20 Many sermons have survived, the liveliest beyond doubt those in

94

95
the vernacular by Bernardino da Siena and Bernardino da Feltre. But Latin sermons, addressed to monks and other religious bodies, undoubtedly could be important and in an age when more and more clergy were educated in the humanities it might be prudent for a preacher to master the rules of ancient oratory. Timoteo Maffei, the Lateran Canon already mentioned, was a great preacher, much admired in his own order for his gifts. And how important contemporaries regarded sacred oratory may be seen in the choice of preachers before the pope. These men were chosen or approved by the papal theologian, the magister palatii, and might be laymen although they were usually clergy and often friars. The sermons were regularly preached—about eighteen times a year (Sundays in Advent and Lent and certain other great feast days throughout the year, especially those associated with Christmas and Easter). Many have perished, but a fair number have survived, including printed copies (doubtless for style as such, but also as models of piety for less eloquent preachers who then as now found fragrance in other men's flowers). Such solemn liturgical occasions usually produced short sermons, overwhelmingly based on the scriptures with these themes emerging again and again: the Incarnation; the Unity and Trinity of the Godhead; and divine providence. In particular the first theme attracted many speakers, who stressed the redemption of man rather than the Passion of Jesus, and so underlined the "dignity of man". How elevated and even poetical such effusions could become may be seen in the letter (really a sermon addressed to Julius II) written to a Roman magistrate. It is a long panegyric for the rôle of Rome and the pope in man's Redemption.

Hear, O ye Romans. Hear, O seven hills. And above all hearest thou, most holy Father. Thou, I repeat, thou great Julius... Lo, the spirit speaks: Christ is the head of Heaven, Rome is the head of the earth... You are mine, mine I say, O seven Roman hills! Hail, happy bride (of Christ) Hail, holy hills! Hail, Aventine...

And thou, O Tiber, washing the walls of my Vatican, thou shalt be a vessel for holy use...

And so on the rhapsody goes, with discreet references to Julius's ancestry and influence (robur). Nor can we dismiss as mere literary exercises the sermons and the passionate appeals such as Giles of Viterbo's, both in the letter just quoted nor in his address to the Fifth Lateran Council. On the surface it would also seem that Leo X paid attention to the 'Libellus' of Giustiniani and Chirini. It has been plausibly argued that the ball

Apostolici regimini of 1513 was not aimed so much at the 'Pomponazzi school' speculating on the immortality of the soul, as at an over-ready adoption of the standards of profane literature in education. That this went counter to the traditions by now taken for granted by many of the pope's humanist friends shows that Giustiniani and Chirini had friends in high places.

There is, in short, something equivocal about the influence of the humanities on religion. One is reminded of the dramatic consequences of sermons in the vernacular, in the enthusiastic adoption of 'reform' by a city, in the competition to have the best and most popular Lenten preachers. The results were short-lived, and perhaps the same is true of the effects of the humanities on quattrocento religion. Professor Alberigo has no doubt that they did have an effect and added they did have an effect...
the first patriarch of Venice (1451–56). But the argument, despite its negative result, turns largely on the Italian editions of the *Imitatio Christi* (152 in Latin before 1500 and 11 in Italian), though much other interesting material is thrown up on the way by the author from whom these facts are derived: eucharistic piety is not common, silent prayers very rare. Other studies have speculated on the failure of Italians to produce a movement comparable to that of the North and partly accounted for it by the influence of the new stress on the humanities; mysticism failed to become organic and positive. What, of course, is so strikingly different at first sight is the tendency of piety—much of it of Venetian origin—to be monopolized by the well-to-do and the well-educated. Where in Italy are the *bégainage*?

Perhaps there were developments along these lines which have been overlooked, such as the *few case sane* in Rome, sometimes containing Dominican or Franciscan tertiaries, sometimes just groups of poor women, *zielle* (old maids). But the *bégainage* or its equivalent owes next to nothing to the church as such; nor is it a kind of prelude to Reformation. Thus it seems somewhat useless to regard the possession of the *Imitation*, or some of Ceris’s works (he was often regarded as the author of the *Imitation*), as a bridge between the new learning and the old piety.

The Italian clergy and intellectual innovation

There is no need here to repeat the account given above of the state of the lower clergy as a whole. With the rarest exceptions parish clergy were ill-educated and ignorant, quite uninterested in the ideas and practices we summarise in the word Renaissance, and, one imagines, quite indifferent to them. This is not to say that a few simple *chiericati*, with first tonsure merely or in minor orders, or a handful of real priests, were not scholars; many men in the curia, even sometimes bishops and cardinals, were in this position. In any case, the medieval manner of supporting learning with church endowments was found in Italy as elsewhere and did not die out for centuries. But in the bigger centres one has the impression that the members of the *haute bourgeoisie* coveted benefices for the immediate income they afforded— for the stupid members of the family rather than the clever men or ambitious ones. An aspiring man of letters of humble origins was more likely to secure support by becoming a secretary or by tutoring, unwelcome though that might be. The religious orders it is true sometimes afforded opportunities for the scholar and writer as we have seen; we can instance the Augustinian

---

Luigi Marsili, or the Camaldolese Ambrogio Traversari. Yet both these men were, as Lauro Martines has shown, scions of ancient and important families. The Florentines behaved very like Venetian patricians, save that the Venetians turned earlier and more effectively to the church, producing whole dynasties of monks who became bishops (Ludovic Barbo), bishops who became cardinals (Francesco Condulmer, Marco Barbo), cardinals who became popes (Gregory XII, Eugenius IV, Paul II); all these men were related to each other.

With the episcopate we enter a group larger and much better documented than the lower clergy. Although there are gaps and uncertainties in the record, we have a mass of information about a mass of men. Their numbers are reassuringly large. For reasons which have been touched on (above pp. 19–21) there were somewhat more frequent appointments to Italian sees than to those of northern Europe. In the fifteenth century there must have been something over 2,000 nominations to sees on the mainland of Italy. I do not mean that quite so large a number of men became bishops; some of these nominations resulted in a translation of one bishop to another see: the point has been made that a fair number of bishops contrived to swap their sees, to exchange their *infulae*, as Ugelli would have put it; some men rattled through senior positions like successful American professors. And of course, as we have seen, in a large number of cases these prelates never saw their flocks; or saw them only by proxy; or saw them once, at a *joyeuse entrée*, all cavalcade and civic protocol, where in the procession shuffled members of the chapter, suspicious that their comfortable customs might conflict with the prerogatives of the bishop as they had often in earlier and more rigorous days.

Nevertheless these men were the cream of the Italian clergy and among them we find the best educated as well as those who were to go highest in the church. What cautious remarks may be made about their quality and about the quality of their education? The figures about to be quoted are derived from a review of provisions to thirty sees in the fifteenth century: eighteen of these in south Italy (of which seven were immediately subject to the Holy See, that is, they did not form part of any province), six sees in the centre (all immediately subject) and six sees in the north (Milan and five of its suffragans).

These numbers reflect in proportion the overall disposition of bishoprics in the peninsula. Of the total of 126 individuals named, only fifty claimed in the *Obbligazioni et solutiones*, from which the information mostly comes, to be graduates. Of these for every one
This pitiful attempt at quantification lends support, I believe, to the view that in general the Italian prelates were not much interested in promoting either the old learning or the new. One might perhaps go on to add that they were not remarkable in any direction: six very minor humanists, two prominent administrators and reformers (who both became cardinals) is a small haul of merit out of the 120 odd bishops I have isolated. True, one beatus with a local cult was remembered in Ughelli’s day. But even that is not very notable by Italian standards. Vespasiano da Bisticci could find only a score of Italian bishops to insert in his lives of worthies and some of them are dull and insignificant men.

When we raise our eyes to the cardinals and the popes there is evidence sometimes of a conscious interest in the new art and the new learning. There are some conspicuous ‘humanist’ pontiffs - Nicholas V, Pius II, Sixtus IV and the Medici popes of the early sixteenth century. And yet one is perplexed to know what exactly they were about. Nicholas V does seem to have had a genuine love of all the features of cultural innovation, a new art and architecture, a new literature and learning. With others one is less secure. Pius II’s appetite for public display is not in doubt. Besides the processions he loved to encourage in Rome, his transformation of Corsignano into a Renaissance museum piece is a remarkable indication of his sympathy with novelty. So is his own vast literary output, as vainglorious as Pienza itself, though destined to be more influential.

It is precisely this quality of self-advertisement, reflected (it will be recalled) in the proliferation of monumental inscriptions, which detracts from the patronage of Sixtus IV and his successors. There is a vulgarity about some of their gestures which does something to diminish the genius of the best of their servants. Can one imagine the bulldozing effect which the monument to Julius II would have had if it had ever been completed to the earlier designs? As for the cardinals, there were some great patrons of culture, well attuned to the rhythms of a new age. But overall how dismal a crew they are from the point of view of education and enlightenment. Let us again make Vespasiano our yardstick. In his lifetime popes created some 147 cardinals, 75 being foreigners. The Florentine book-seller can find only six of these Italians to commemorate and an equal number of foreigners - hardly evidence of the intellectual richness of the cream of the cream.

Of course it is obvious that a good parish priest scarcely needs to be a good scholar. Popes and princes chose prelates in the fifteenth century, as always before and since, primarily because they were well-
he was the predecessor of the Mario Maffei referred to above.68 Other examples of families of curialists married or clerical could be insinuated, for example the Cortese family; Paolo Cortese’s work De cardinalatus is one of the best available accounts of how cardinals at the curia were expected to live.69

Nevertheless, there was undoubtedly tension between those curialists who had a future of promotion through the ranks of the hierarchy and those debarred by maternity. It is indeed plausibly suggested by Delaruelle and his colleagues in their survey of the church at this time that such pressures account for the childish indecencies of a work like Poggio Bracciolini’s Facetiae, an authentic account, it seems all too probable, of the after-work relaxation of the papal secretaries, boozing at the ‘Bagiale’. ‘Par ces ragots les lais se revachent des humiliations que leur ont fait subir des cardinaux sans culture, ragots qui vont courir la ville et alimenter les lazzi de Madame Lucrèce et de Pasquin’.70 In view of the close connection between humanists and the curia it is a matter of some surprise that no fifteenth-century Italian writer seems to have made out a case for adequate promotion and pay in a lay bureaucracy; although of course the education of the laity for responsible secular government was part of the new humanist programme, and many laymen had penetrated to high positions in the service of the princes of the peninsula. Exactly such a man (and he was to be followed by others, including the author of the Facetiae) became chancellor of Florence in the person of Coluccio Salutati, who retained the office till his death in 1406. Salutati, twice married, was greatly admired as a Latin stylist in the new manner. Yet despite his own career, when asked by a monk to produce a reasoned defence of the life of religion, he wrote a substantial work, De seculo et religious, in which he reiterated with much vehemence and every appearance of sincerity the traditional justifications of withdrawal from the world. True, one of Coluccio’s letters survives in which he discourages a friend from entering a monastery. The whole question of the chancellor’s conflicting views and the apparent contradiction between some of his principles and all of his life, has occasioned much learned debate. But we are here dealing, I believe, with commonplaces of debate, void of material significance.71 The same observation applies to the empty oratory of Ermolao Barbaro’s De coelitibus. Nor is there any coming to grips with the question which must have agitated so many contemporaries in Gian Antonio Campana’s essay ‘On the dignity of maternity’. There we find Pauline precepts elegantly presented in classical diction; interesting though it is as an idealised picture of
Italian marriage among the well-to-do in the late fifteenth century, it has little to offer that is original in outlook. Campania, of very humble background, became a favourite of Pius II and ultimately bishop of Crotone (1462), in consequence the following year he was translated to Teramo. He was celebrated for his wit and his life of Pius II, but not much more. He must clearly have opted with some deliberation for the clerical life and clerical promotion.52

One could, however, have it both ways, or at least postpone the decision whether to remain a cleric coniugato of a minor kind (and dozens of the curial clerks and many others besides were in minor orders) until the main chance to higher things offered itself. It was possible to have a hasty marriage annulled in favour of a career as a papal servant. This was how Adriano Castellesi acted after he regretted his marriage to Brigida Inghirami; he had been so ill (he claimed) that the marriage was not consummated, and he then had a vision (so a critic alleges) that he would be pope if he took orders. Innocent VIII wrote an accommodating directive to the bishop of Volterra ordering him to dissolve the marriage of his (the pope's) familiar, and Adriano, of obscure origins, began his meteoric rise, largely paid for (said another critic) by his bleeding white the Church of England. At any rate, even though he died in disgrace and obscurity, he accumulated enough money to buy a cardinal's hat in 1503 and to build a fine Renaissance palace, still standing in the Borgo where he gave, before it was completed, to his patron Henry VIII of England.53 This man had, in any worldly sense, chosen his master well. We do not know when he was born (it was at Corneto, nowadays Tarquinia) or when he died (probably near Venice and by the sword, around 1522). But he accumulated an enormous fortune. Another occasion worth recalling is that moment when Francesco Guicciardini's uncle, a bastard called Riniere who was bishop of Cortona, died in 1504. Should Francesco go into the Church?54 If he had he would surely have become a cardinal instead of a disillumined lay servant of the popes who came to hate the clergy as the cause of Italy's miseries, and who said he would have become a Lutheran save for self-interest.55

There is little doubt that in maintaining a clerical bureaucracy into the sixteenth century and later, the papacy cut itself off from contemporary trends in Europe. There the laity was steadily taking over from the fifteenth century onwards. This had its problems, since office was treated as property. But then often, by resignationes in favorem and the other devices already mentioned, office had also become property in Rome. Culturally royal secrearies in England and France were no different from their opposite numbers in Rome. But when they were laymen they were freer agents and had a greater incentive to exercise power and influence since they could transmit their gains to their direct heirs.56 This was more difficult, it seems, with the wealthiest cardinals, top members of the curia. Their wealth was stupendous—quite beyond computation, since one cannot know how much of their income was fetched from them by agents. But there is no doubt of the staggering accumulation of benefits by even bigger (than Cardinal Adriano Castellesi, Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga (d. 1518) and Cardinal Marzo Barbo (d. 1519) both had a fabulous collection of commendams; so had Giovanni Battista Zeno (d. 1501) and Ascanio Sforza (d. 1505), and so had Raffaello Riario (d. 1521), perhaps the richest of the lot in this period.57 But wealth paradoxically bred beggary if it is used to keep up appearances and above all to build— to repair the titular church, to construct great palaces, to maintain a huge establishment of servants58 and above all if it is derived from church offices and not directly from land. Many cardinals were poor, but the very rich in effect built rather for Rome than for their families. The Palazzo Venezia, as it is now called, was the palace of Cardinal Pietro Barbo, who later resided there as Paul II; it remained a papal residence until it became the home of the Venetian ambassador to Rome in 1564. The colossal palace of Riario became the Cancelleria.59

The re-building in Rome and in Renaissance Italy cannot be dealt with adequately here and it has in any case attracted a large and modern literature.60 But of all the builders the popes and their richer colleagues (rich and in debt at the same time as they might be) were among the most impressive. Scarcely a church that was not rebuilt or re-decorated in the new manner, and of the palaces the greatest was that raised by successive popes at the Vatican.61 St Peter's itself was not to be completed for generations, and the Borgo did not take the form that Pope Nicholas V had hoped for it. But the basic scheme had been set, from Porta del Popolo and its radiating streets, to the Campidiglio designed by Michelangelo, for the first great planned city in Europe. And the basis of the plan was essentially antique. Ut poesis architectura, if the adaptation be allowed. In their building the popes and other patrons were, of course, at first following Florentine models, and following also in the tracks of the other princcipings of Italy. But they had the city to play with and could and did proceed on a larger scale than other contemporary governments in the peninsula. There seems little doubt that the new artistic and architectural manner was adopted by the smaller courts of Italy, including the
papal court, before it penetrated Naples, Milan, Venice or the countries of northern Europe.

Art has, indeed, been advanced often as an indicator of Renaissance pressures on Italian cultural life, and in particular on the attitude of the popes and other clergy, unquestionably the biggest group of patrons. Pastor, as I have remarked above, first tried to enlist the numbers of religious paintings, sculptures and ecclesiastical buildings as evidence of active Christian principles in the quattrocento. For paintings he took over from Müntz the statement that for every Renaissance painting of this period with a pagan subject there were twenty with a religious subject.66 Basing himself on the work of Errera, Peter Burke has recently shown that of dated pictures the percentage of secular subjects rose from 5 per cent in the 1480s to 22 per cent in the 1520s.67 That there is broad agreement here is evident; it is also obvious that religious paintings, preserved in churches and monasteries, have a better chance of surviving than secular works painted for patrons who tended themselves to be fickle. But the analysis by subject leaves out of account the style in which the painting was done. In many ways Michelangelo’s God the Father on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel seems to me related closely in spirit to Raphael’s Pluto in the ‘School of Athens’, or even to his Galatea. Michelangelo’s art is profoundly religious; it also profoundly differs from church decoration in the Middle Ages. He and his predecessors and successors were surely doing something which cannot have failed to affect religious sensibility, though it is impossible to know exactly what the effects were.

Pastor’s list of buildings and sculpture is a much more curious affair.68 He simply ignores not only the question of style but any church that he finds offensive, like the Malatesta Temple at Rimini.69 Nor does he explain the relationship of new churches to old: one might guess that for every church being built or extended or lavishly decorated in Renaissance Italy at least one other was crumbling into ruins. And sometimes the two processes coincided, as in the building at Pienza. Finally, the financing of church building remains overall extremely obscure. For Milan, Florence and one or two big cathedrals we have accounts running over a long period.70 For most individual Renaissance churches we know nothing; but the Italian church in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries was, it seems, getting progressively poorer,71 perhaps because it was building so much.

It may be suspected that in art and architecture the Italian clergy were often at the mercy of lay patrons, and that in general neither laymen nor clergy were pursuing a deliberately innovating policy in literature and the arts until the sixteenth century. A great deal of the old survived, marked by or mingling with the new. At Pienza one can admire Pius II’s crape – fine old-fashioned *opus Anglicanum*; and his cathedral in its overall structure is an old-fashioned building. At Rimini Alberti’s temple only partially clothes the old church which is its core. Both at Rimini and Pienza it is in the detailed decoration that one is buffeted by the wind of change. Much the same is true of Cardinal Branda’s buildings at Castiglione Olna in northern Italy.

These physical changes in Rome and other large towns, which must have struck ordinary men and women, must also have struck ordinary clergy. With these should perhaps be linked papal encouragement of display in the form of public ceremonial, a question already touched on above (pp. 40–1, 45–6). The most famous occasion for this in Rome was *the possessio*, when the pope, with the whole curia in due (and sometimes angrily disputed) order, made his way solemnly to take possession of his basilica at the Lateran, the Roman church par excellence, a grander example of those ceremonies attending the entry of a bishop into his diocese, on which we have already remarked.72 This ceremony was not new; something like it occurred whenever the pope entered a town; but it was lovingly cultivated by the papacy established in Rome, which, from the mid-fifteenth century, they governed ever more securely. The details are carefully recorded by papal masters of ceremonies, like Burckard, and one such has been described above.73 The colourful scenes were repeated, with less solemnity perhaps, during Jubilee visits to the principal churches.74 It may be added that papal preparations for the enormous numbers of visitors during the Holy Years led to embellishments and improvements of the facilities of the city and its physical appearance, from Sixtus IV onwards; the Holy Year, in fact, was an important factor in the phasing of the reconstruction of Rome already mentioned.75

Nor must we forget the classical motif that often accompanied other papal display. One must recall, since he is so careful to do so himself, the solemnities of the reception into Rome of the head of St Andrew by Pius II and the gaieties – faintly ‘ pagan’ in quality – he encouraged at Pienza,76 and which took form under Paul II in the carnival – also faintly ‘ pagan’ – which he sponsored from 1465, so it has been argued, as an alternative to the grimmer public amusements of Rome;77 this occasion, and its races, were to give the Corsa its name.
The Italian clergy in the early sixteenth century

There is no need to recapitulate the evidence brought forward in earlier chapters, but some general reflections may suitably conclude this brief survey.

As a whole, and not least because of the mountainous terrain, the parochial clergy of rural Italy were of extremely poor quality, intellectually and morally. In the cities, for a variety of reasons, and notably because of the absence of the bishop, local authorities, communal or princely, interfered with the clergy often to the detriment of the discipline of chapters of cathedrals and the establishments of convents of men and women religious. Among the laity there is hardly any evidence of anti-Christian sentiment, though there is massive evidence of ignorance and inertia, hardly balanced (one might guess) by the spasmodic responses to Bernardino or Savonarola, and other great preachers, nor by the existence of many charitable and other confraternities among the better-off. If there is little out right heresy, there was not much evidence of profound piety among the poor, though the mystique of Mary remained untouched and many new liturgical devotions appealed to all classes, such as the rosary and the pax (above p. 69).

As for the effects of the Renaissance on the clergy: in the end they had no alternative but to conform to the new manner. The low-grade clergy, not least because they were often elected by their parishioners or employed by lay-controlled guilds and confraternities, were very much the subservient creatures of the secular culture around them. Few would have followed the argument over ‘poetry’ or ‘paganism’; fewer still would find the basic form of Renaissance architecture – in towns, especially Rome, where the forms of the ancient basilica had never lost their dominance – at all shocking, whatever they thought about the detailed decoration. We would like to know what simple clergymen thought of the new religious art as it developed from Masaccio down to Raphael and Michelangelo. From its rapid diffusion in churches and convents big and little one can only assume its mixture of charm and realism met with clerical approval.

In any case the leader of the clergy, the Cardinals and above all the pope, if they gave no lead worth the name in church reform, did give a lead in the literary, moral and artistic developments which, from their base in Tuscany, had spread through Italy in the second half of the fifteenth century and which, by 1500, had their focal point in Rome. The popes, it has been said, were anxious to replace a spiritual leadership in Christendom by a cultural leadership in Europe. Rome was already the capital of grace and prayer. Now it was to be the capital of pomp and culture. That this was offensive to northern reformers like Erasmus and Luther is one of the sadly comical aspects of a situation in which the papacy could seldom distinguish its long-term and its short-term interests.

We must, however, be most cautious in attributing too great a degree of coherence in papal and curial leadership in such changes. Neither Martin V nor Eugenius IV were in any real sense sympathetic to new cultural developments. If Nicholas V certainly was, then Calixtus III most certainly was not. Pius II is a puzzling figure, and if Pienza and Siena saw his relatively modest buildings, Rome certainly owes little permanent to him. Thereafter the popes are carried along increasingly on a cultural wave on which they were content to be borne: Paul II with his gems and medals, Sixtus IV with the library, and all of them with the Vatican palaces. Inside the palace was the established library which is one of the great glories of the Vatican, and inside the palace the archives continued to accumulate, increasingly if unsystematically written in the consilia cancellaria which was so greatly to influence the style of European handwriting and printing.

When Rome began to recover after the Sack of 1527 and when with the mid-sixteenth century Italy settled down to a period of relative peace, the clergy gradually emerge, in all fundamental points, similar to those of the rest of Europe. Those that were educated were familiar with the basic Latin classics and the Bible; and so were their lay contemporaries in both Protestant and Catholic lands. After the Council of Trent the spread of seminaries slowly, very slowly, reached most of the larger Italian episcopal towns and an instructed priest became far less rare. The process may have been slower in Italy than in northern Europe: it is a matter worth investigating. Certainly the hierarchy in Italy set its face against some of the more exciting intellectual developments of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was at this stage that Italy, which from 1350 had been the intellectual leader of Europe, ceded pride of place again to France. That this was the result solely of papal or clerical attitudes it would be absurd to argue. That these played a large part in the intellectual stagnation of a peninsula exhausted by war cannot be doubted. Nor can the historian of Europe deny that the general position of the Italianised church in the century prior to Luther made it singularly unfit to meet the challenge of the reformers.