



Absolute Monarchs: A History of the Papacy

By John Julius Norwich

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In a chronicle that captures nearly two thousand years of inspiration and intrigue, John Julius Norwich recounts in riveting detail the histories of the most significant popes and what they meant politically, culturally, and socially to Rome and to the world. Norwich presents such popes as Innocent I, who in the fifth century successfully negotiated with Alaric the Goth, an invader civil authorities could not defeat; Leo I, who two decades later tamed (and perhaps paid off) Attila the Hun; the infamous “pornocracy”—the five libertines who were descendants or lovers of Marozia, debauched daughter of one of Rome’s most powerful families; Pope Paul III, “the greatest pontiff of the sixteenth century,” who reinterpreted the Church’s teaching and discipline; John XXIII, who in five short years starting in 1958 instituted reforms that led to Vatican II; and Benedict XVI, who is coping with today’s global priest sex scandal. Epic and compelling, *Absolute Monarchs* is an enthralling history from “an enchanting and satisfying raconteur” (*The Washington Post*).

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Editorial Review

Review

“A rollicking narrative . . . [Norwich] keeps things moving at nearly beach-read pace.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A highly entertaining read . . . [John Julius] Norwich has a lightness of touch and caustic sense of humour. . . As a lively romp through two millenniums of ecclesiastical history, [*Absolute Monarchs* is] well-nigh infallible.”—*The Sunday Business Post*

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“Deeply researched, Norwich’s history offers a wonderful introduction to papal lives.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Excellent, often surprising . . . An outstanding historical survey.”—*Booklist*

“[A] sweeping history . . . [a] cacophony of temporal sin.”—*Los Angeles Times*

About the Author

John Julius Norwich is one of Britain’s preeminent historians and travel writers. He has written the histories of Norman Sicily, Byzantium, Venice, and the Mediterranean. Other books have been on Shakespeare’s history plays, on music, and on architecture.

From the Hardcover edition.

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CHAPTER I

Saint Peter

After nearly two thousand years of existence, the Papacy is the oldest continuing absolute monarchy in the world. To countless millions, the Pope is the Vicar of Christ on earth, the infallible interpreter of divine revelation. To millions more, he is the fulfilment of the Biblical prophecies of Antichrist. What cannot be denied is that the Roman Catholic Church, of which he is the head, is as old as Christianity itself; all other Christian religions - and there are more than 22,000 of them - are offshoots or deviants from it.

It all started, according to the generally accepted view, with St Peter. To most of us he is a familiar figure. We see his portrait in a thousand churches - painted, frescoed or chiselled in stone: curly grey hair, close-cropped beard, his keys dangling from the waist. Sometimes he stands beside, sometimes opposite, the black-bearded, balding St Paul, armed with book and sword. Together they represent the Church’s joint mission - Peter to the Jews of the diaspora, Paul to the Gentiles. Peter’s original name was Simon, or perhaps

Symeon. (Oddly enough, the two names are unrelated: the first is Greek, the second Hebrew, but both languages were current in Bethsaida in Galilee where he was born.) Profession: fisherman, and quite a successful one. He and his brother Andrew were in partnership with James and John, the sons of Zebedee; he seems to have had his own boat, and he could certainly afford to employ a number of assistants. His brother Andrew is described by St John as having been a disciple of John the Baptist, and it may well have been through the Baptist that Simon first met Jesus. At any rate he soon became the first of the disciples, and then of the twelve Apostles whom Christ selected from them - seeing them, perhaps, as a symbol of the twelve tribes of Israel; and he had already reached this position of preeminence when, at Caesarea Philippi, St Matthew (xvi, 18-19) reports Jesus as saying to him: "Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.... I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven." On those few words - the Latin version of which is inscribed around the base of the dome of St Peter's - rests the entire structure of the Roman Catholic Church.

The name Peter is so familiar to us today that it comes as something of a surprise to learn that until those words were uttered it was not a name at all, but a perfectly ordinary noun: the Aramaic *kephas*, translated into the Greek *petros*, meaning a rock or stone. There seems little doubt that Jesus did indeed bestow it upon Simon; the fact is confirmed by St Mark, and also (albeit writing some time afterwards) by St John, although the two admittedly disagree about the actual occasion when the event occurred. Matthew's, however, is the only gospel that adds Jesus's stated reason for the choice of name, and it is this addition that has led scholars to suggest that the whole passage may be a later interpolation. The very fact that it does not appear in the other gospels has struck some of them as suspicious -though there are plenty of other incidents that are reported by only one of the evangelists and have gone unquestioned. A stronger objection is that the word for "church" - the Greek *ecclesia* - occurs only twice in all four gospels, its other appearance[i] being in a context that is suspect for other reasons. In any event, would Jesus really be thinking at this early stage of founding a church?

If Jesus never uttered the words at all, then the Roman Catholic Church, far from being founded on a rock, rests on very shaky foundations indeed. But even if he did, another question remains: what precisely did he mean? Was Peter, having established the Church, to be followed by an infinite number of successors, each in turn inheriting Peter's own apostolic commission? And if so, in what capacity? Not, certainly, as Bishops of Rome, a city which Christ never mentioned - to him Jerusalem was far more important. The evidence, such as it is, suggests that he meant nothing of the kind.

And what happened to Peter anyway? The New Testament tells us virtually nothing, either about him or about his colleague St Paul. According to a very early tradition, they were both in Rome in the year 64 AD, when a terrifying fire raged through the city. The Emperor Nero was accused of "fiddling", or singing to his lute, during the conflagration, and was later rumoured to have started it himself. Tacitus tells us that

to be rid of this rumour, Nero fastened the guilt on a class hated for their abominations, which the populace called Christians. Mockery of every sort accompanied their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn apart by dogs and so perished. Others were nailed to crosses or consumed by the flames. Nero even threw open his garden for the spectacle and mounted a performance in the circus.

According to that same tradition, both Peter and Paul were among the victims. The Acts of the Apostles, however - written, almost certainly after these persecutions, by St Luke, whom we know to have accompanied Paul to Rome - is once again maddeningly uninformative. It does not even mention Paul's martyrdom, merely remarking in its penultimate verse that he stayed in the city for two years; As for Peter, he fades out of the book for ever halfway through Chapter XII, when we are told, quite simply, that "he departed, and went to another place". The spotlight then turns on Paul, and remains on him till the end.

There are so many questions that Luke could have answered. Was Peter indeed crucified head downwards, at his request? Was he even crucified at all? Did he ever actually travel to Rome? He certainly had good reason to, simply because to him was entrusted the mission to the Jews, and - with some 30-40,000 Jews living in Rome at that time - the embryonic Roman Church would have been very largely Jewish. But nowhere in the New Testament is there any evidence that he went to Rome at all. He certainly does not seem

to have been there when Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans, probably in 58 AD. The final chapter of the Epistle gives a long list of names to whom the writer sends his greetings; the name of Peter is not among them. If, then, he did indeed meet his death in Rome, he could not have been there for very long - certainly not long enough to found the Roman Church, which in any case had already begun to take shape. It is worth pointing out, too, that there is no contemporary or even near-contemporary reference to Peter as having been a bishop; nor, according to all the indications, was there even a bishop in Rome before the second century.[ii]

There are however two pieces of evidence that suggest that Peter did indeed visit the capital and die there, though neither is altogether conclusive. The first comes from his own First Epistle, the penultimate verse of which contains the words "She [presumably the Church, such as it was] that is in Babylon..... saluteth you". This is at first sight nonsense, until we discover that Babylon was a recognised symbolic name for Rome, used in this sense no less than four times in the Book of Revelation. The second testimony comes in a letter from a certain Clement, a Roman presbyter, or elder of the Church - he usually appears as third or fourth in the list of Popes - who seems to have known St Peter personally[iii]. It was written in about 96 AD to the Church at Corinth, where a serious dispute had arisen. The key passage here (in Chapter V) reads: "Let us set before our eyes our good apostles: Peter, who because of unrighteous jealousy suffered not one or two but many trials, and having thus given his testimony went to the glorious place which was his due. Through jealousy and strife Paul demonstrated how to win the prize of patient endurance: seven times he was imprisoned; he was forced to leave and stoned; he preached in the East and the West; and, finally, he won the splendid renown which his faith had earned."

Why, we ask ourselves for the thousandth time, did the early fathers have to do quite so much beating about the bush? Why could they not say in so many words that people were martyred or crucified? But there: we know that Paul met his death during the persecutions under Nero - Tertullian tells us that he was beheaded - and the way Clement mentions the two in almost the same breath strongly suggests that Peter met a similar fate. All that can be said for sure is that by the middle of the second century - which could well be during the lifetime of the grandchildren of people who had actually known them - it was generally accepted that Peter and Paul had both been martyred in Rome. There were even two places associated with their martyrdom: and not specifically Christian burial-places like the Catacombs either, but non-denominational cemeteries, one in the Vatican, the other outside the walls on the road to Ostia.

* * * * *

When, in about 320 AD, the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great decided to build a basilica dedicated to St Peter on the Vatican Hill, he was clearly determined to build it on that precise spot and nowhere else. This caused him appalling difficulties. Instead of settling for the more or less level ground at the base of the hill, he chose a site on a steep slope - a decision which involved cutting away a vast mass of the hillside above, and constructing three heavy parallel walls beneath, the spaces between them densely packed with earth. Moreover the chosen site was already a huge necropolis, teeming with burial-places, and was still in use. Hundreds of tombs must have been destroyed, thousands of bodies desecrated. There was no time for demolition: the buildings simply had their roofs removed, after which they were filled with rubble to make a foundation for the new basilica - a practice, incidentally, which proved a blessing to twentieth-century archaeologists. The orientation of the Emperor's new building was also curious: the liturgical east end faced due west. For all this, there can have been only one reason: Constantine built directly over the spot where he believed the bones of St Peter to lie.

Was he right? Well, he may have been. We have one more piece of near-contemporary evidence. The historian Eusebius[iv] quotes a Roman priest named Gaius, who wrote in about 200 AD: "If you go to the Vatican or to the Ostian Way, there you find the trophies (*tropaia*) of those who founded this Church." The Ostian Way refers to St Paul and does not concern us here; but the Vatican reference surely suggests some sort of memorial - *tropaion* means a monument of victory or triumph - to St Peter that was clearly

visible on the Vatican Hill, at that time an open cemetery.

Excavations undertaken in the *sacre grotte* - the crypt of the basilica, below the floor of the Constantinian church - during and immediately after the Second World War revealed a two-tiered, three-niched construction, usually known as the *aedicula* and datable to 160-170 AD. In front of it are several earlier burial-places - a fact which may well be more significant than first appears. Since these contain no tombs or sarcophagi we cannot be sure whether they are Christian or pagan; we know however that in Rome, up to at least the middle of the second century, bodies were normally cremated; the absence of cremations from this particular corner of the old cemetery suggests that it may have been reserved for people holding special beliefs, in which case they were most probably Christians. Moreover, the presence of a considerable number of votive coins - a few from as early as the first century - strongly suggests that here was a much-visited shrine.

For reasons too long and complicated to go into here[v], the *aedicula* is now generally believed to be Gaius's "trophy". Pope Pius XII, however, went a good deal further when, in his 1950 Christmas Message, he confidently claimed it to be the burial-place of St Peter. Such certainly seems to have been the generally-held belief in Rome towards the end of the second century; but, perhaps inevitably, there have been objections. Peter was not, as Paul was, a highly sophisticated Roman citizen; he was an uneducated Galilean fisherman. If he had been executed - whether or not by crucifixion - his body would normally have been thrown into the Tiber and would have been difficult indeed to recover. If he had met his death by fire among the countless other victims of Nero's persecutions, his remains are still less likely to have survived. Perhaps, then, it is more probable that the *aedicula* was intended as a sort of cenotaph, a memorial rather than a mausoleum.

We can speculate for ever; but we shall never know for sure. Nor, on the other hand, is it really necessary that we should. Even if that enigmatic little construction has no connection with him at all, St Peter may still have come to Rome. If it does, and does indeed mark his final resting-place, it still gives no real support to the claims of all succeeding Popes to have inherited from him their divine commission. And here, surely, is the crux of the matter. Peter's function, if we are to accept the testimony of St Matthew, was to be a foundation stone for the Church; and foundation stones, by definition, are unique. The doctrine of the Apostolic Succession, which is accepted by both the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches, holds that bishops represent a direct, uninterrupted line of descent from the Apostles, by virtue of which they possess certain special powers, including those of confirming church members, ordaining priests and consecrating other bishops. So far so good; but there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that they may inherit the distinctive commission which was given to Peter alone.

Chapter I:

[i]Matthew xviii,17.

[ii]A treatise known as *The Shepherd of Hermas*, written in Rome at the beginning of the second century, always speaks of "the rulers of the Church" or "the elders that preside over the Church". It is hard to say who was the first true Pope, or supreme bishop; but the process seems to have been complete by the time of Anicetus (c.155-166), though until well into the third century the Christian community in Rome remained dangerously fissile.

[iii]Later, according at least to legend, he was exiled to the Crimea and martyred by being tied to an anchor and hurled into the sea.

[iv]*Historia Ecclesiastica*, ii.

[v]Readers wishing to know more are referred to J. Toynbee and J. Ward-Perkins, *The Shrine of St Peter and the Vatican Excavations*, London 1956.

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