

SANGUIS IN MANIBUS VESTRIS

Blood on Thy Hands

A History of the Roman Catholic Church

Volume One: The Popes

"Your hands are full of blood. Wash you, be clean."

Isaiah 1:15–16

Every claim in this book is weighed and labelled:

ESTABLISHED • PLAUSIBLE • POSSIBLE • LEGEND • FABRICATION

Carlos Coronado Bonilla

Blood on Thy Hands: A History of the Roman Catholic Church. Volume One: The Popes

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INTRODUCTION

HOW TO READ A LIST OF POPES

TWO HUNDRED AND SIXTY-SEVEN MEN

ON the evening of 8 May 2025, white smoke rose from a thin chimney above the Sistine Chapel, and the bells of Saint Peter's began to ring. An hour later a cardinal stepped onto the balcony and spoke the ancient formula, *Habemus papam*, "We have a pope." The new pope was Robert Francis Prevost, born in Chicago, a missionary bishop in Peru, and he took the name Leo XIV. According to the official reckoning of the Catholic Church, he is the two hundred and sixty-seventh bishop of Rome in an unbroken line that reaches back to the apostle Peter.

No other institution on earth claims a line of leaders so long. Kings and emperors, republics and revolutions have risen and vanished while the line of popes continued. Among those two hundred and sixty-seven men were saints and scholars, martyrs and reformers, builders of hospitals and defenders of the poor. Among them were also murderers, simoniacs who bought their office, fathers of illegitimate children who made their sons cardinals, warlords in armour, torturers' patrons, and men who stood silent before atrocities. Some were both.

This volume tells the story of every one of them: who they were, what they are known for, and the good, the bad, and the ugly of their reigns. It does not set out to praise the papacy or to destroy it. It sets out to tell the truth about it, as far as the evidence allows.

WHAT "POPE" MEANS

The word *pope* comes from the Greek *pappas*, an affectionate word for "father." In the early Church it was used for many bishops and even for ordinary priests; in the Eastern churches it still is. The bishop of Alexandria was called "pope" before the bishop of Rome was. Only gradually, between the fifth and the eleventh centuries, did the title come to belong to the bishop of Rome alone in the West. In 1075 Pope Gregory VII included in his *Dictatus Papae*, a list of papal powers, the claim that "his name alone is to be spoken in the churches" and that the title of pope was "unique in the world."

The pope's official titles today include Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of Italy, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province, Sovereign of the Vatican City State, and Servant of the Servants of God. Each of those titles has a history, and several of them will appear in these pages as weapons, shields, or prizes.

HOW THE POPES ARE COUNTED

The Church's official list is published each year in the Vatican's directory, the *Annuario Pontificio*. It is not as simple as it looks.

For the first two centuries, as Chapter 1 will show, the names and dates on the list cannot be verified. The earliest surviving list was written around 180, and most historians believe that the church of Rome was led for much of the first century and a half by a group of elders rather than a single bishop. The names on the early list are probably real people, remembered leaders of the Roman church, but their order, their dates, and their exact role are uncertain.

Later, the list has its own puzzles:

- **Popes who were never popes.** There is no Pope John XX. A medieval miscount, which split one pope into two, led the next John to call himself John XXI, and the numbering has been off ever since. Similarly there was never a Pope Donus II or a Martin II and Martin III (the two Marinuses were counted as Martins).
- **The Stephen problem.** A priest named Stephen was elected in 752 but died three days later, before he could be consecrated. For centuries he was counted as Stephen II; in 1961 the Vatican removed him from the official list, so every later Stephen has two possible numbers. This book uses the double form, for example Stephen II (III).
- **Rival popes.** At several moments two or three men claimed the pa-

Death

In 1216 Innocent travelled north to make peace between Pisa and Genoa, whose fleets he needed for the new crusade. He fell ill with a fever at Perugia and died there on 16 July 1216, aged about fifty-five. The scene that Jacques de Vitry found the next day, the body of the master of Christendom lying stripped and decaying in the cathedral, opens this chapter.

The good. Innocent III was a brilliant administrator, lawyer, and theologian. He defended a wronged queen against the king of France; he understood and embraced the movement of Francis of Assisi; he gave the Church its rule of annual confession and communion; and he ended the Church's participation in trial by ordeal. He condemned, in words that still burn, the crimes committed by his crusaders at Constantinople.

The bad. He claimed and exercised a power over kings and kingdoms that went far beyond anything the Gospel suggests. He annulled Magna Carta. He launched a crusade that sacked the greatest Christian city in the world and made the schism with the Orthodox permanent.

The ugly. He launched the Albigensian Crusade, in which the city of Béziers was massacred and hundreds of men and women were burned alive for their beliefs, offering the lands of the victims as plunder to the crusaders. His council required the Jews of Europe to wear distinctive clothing, marking them out for centuries of humiliation and violence, and ordered rulers to purge their lands of heretics under pain of losing them.

Verdict. The most powerful pope in history: lawgiver, judge of kings, friend of Francis, and the author of two crusades that Christians themselves came to regard with shame.



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