



## The Bad Popes

*E.R. Chamberlin*

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## **The Bad Popes** E.R. Chamberlin

Let yourself be swept up by this colorful, panoramic story of seven men who ruled the Church of Rome at seven critical periods in the 600 years leading up to the Reformation. During this age of grandeur & corruption, popes led armies, made love & war, conspired for power, & armed themselves with the techniques of assassination & seduction while clothed with the authority of the Church. Dramatic accounts of these papal bad boys include: Urban VI, the wild man from Naples, whose grotesque savageries widened & maintained the scandalous gap of the Great Schism; Alexander VI, who brought to the See of Peter the intrigues of the Borgia; & Clement VII, the unskillful fox, whose fall brought down Rome itself. Profusely illustrated with architectural photos & contemporary art from both Catholic & Protestant sources, this absorbing work vividly depicts the ecclesiastical corruptions which changed the course of history.

## **The Bad Popes Details**

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# From Reader Review The Bad Popes for online ebook

## Anthony says

I read the UC Davis library copy in the 1970s and later picked up a copy of my own. Gossipy and detailed, the book is a treat for people fascinated by political intrigue. A Catholic background helps, but is not mandatory. It's less about religion than the use of religious authority in power politics.

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## JenSun71 says

Interesting history, though the author spares no time with any pomp and circumstance. The subject matter is spicy, but bring your own background knowledge in Catholicism, a pot of coffee, and sheer determination because he spits the facts out rapid-fire and with no particular fanfare for the first part of the book.

As the history references become easier to find for the author, so does the writing become more entertaining. In other words, hang in there through the first few chapters.

By Pope Boniface VIII you'll feel like you've gotten the hang of it, but really the author has extra details to make the stories nuanced, layered, and interesting. And the Popes just get more and more "bad!"

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## Jonathan Gallardo says

I love the start of the book with the historical view of Rome however it is a bit difficult to follow through all the bad popes. It has great detail on the lives of these bad popes, something I appreciated. Fairly exhaustive so be ready to commit.

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## Lisa says

Those lying, corrupted rascals! Ooooooh, if my hardcore Catholic mother knew about all the shenanigans these guys, AND GIRL, were up to! Reminds me of the time I took her to see The Godfather part 3 and she kept saying over and over that it was the devil who made the film makers portray the Vatican in such a bad light.

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## nostalgebraist says

I started reading this over two years ago, and put it down for a very long time before deciding to pick it up again. That isn't *necessarily* a reflection on the quality of the book, which is -- at least -- well-written on the sentence level and told with an appropriately wry sense of humor. But it *is* a reflection on my unexpectedly low level of interest in the subject matter. Or, anyway, in the *aspects* of his subject matter that Chamberlin focuses on, to the notable exclusion of others.

What I was not prepared for, when I picked up this book, was its exclusive focus on the temporal aspect of the papacy as opposed to its spiritual aspect. Large stretches of the text could be read and productively understood by someone who had no idea that the pope was a religious leader -- someone who was under the impression that the pope was merely the king of a certain group of medieval territories called the Papal States. The pages are full of military maneuvers and political scheming, and much of the bad behavior of these bad popes is the kind of power-hungry bad behavior we'd expect from a monarch -- stuff like screwing everyone else over to support the military campaigns and/or political ambition of a favored relative.

A title like "The Bad Popes" has, to me, certain connotations that, I dunno, "Horrible Kings of Medieval Europe" would not. Few people in the modern world have any strong attachment to the divine right of kings, but there are over a billion Roman Catholics in the world, and apostolic succession is still Catholic doctrine. The very *acknowledgement* that there were "bad popes" raises questions about the continuity of the church that still arouse strong feelings, and one might hope that any inquiry into "bad popes" would at least address such tensions. But while Chamberlin *occasionally* touches on them -- it would be hard not to -- he is almost entirely in the business of telling stories about the Game of Thrones stuff going on in the temporal sphere.

To some extent, I think I just hadn't realized how much the papacy *was* like any other medieval monarchy in this period, and on that score this book was a helpful corrective. I also get the sense, from some comments at the very start and end of the book, that Chamberlin sees the temporal ambitions of the papacy as part-and-parcel of the "badness," so that the corruption of a spiritual leadership role by that ambition is the *frame* for his story, even though the story is entirely concerned with how the ambition went and not with what spiritual matters were occurring (or not occurring) in parallel. So, on the third-to-last page, he writes

In all but his personal attributes, Clement VII was the protagonist in a Greek tragedy, the victim called upon to endure the results of actions committed long before. Each temporal claim of his predecessors had entangled the Papacy just a little more in the lethal game of politics; even while each moral debasement divorced it just a little more from the vast body of Christians from whom it ultimately drew its strength. Its supernatural role for centuries had buttressed its temporal claims. So Dante could excoriate the men who had attacked Pope Boniface VIII, even though Boniface as a man had been his most hated enemy. So Cesare Borgia's victim could plead for absolution from his murderer's father -- and neither victim, murderer, nor father was aware of the inherent irony.

But the buttress was being eroded at its base as the faith of Christians was weakened by the more bizarre activities of those who claimed to hold the sword as well as the keys.

But if this angle is at all important, then this is far too little, far too late: the preceding 283 pages have told us nothing about this "vast body of Christians" and how it reacted to each development. Or even to how the popes themselves, and their close associates, conceived of the relation between their worldly activities and the conditions of their souls. Chamberlin tells us many facts about those activities and their depravity, but throughout, his very standard of depravity is a secular one. One gets the sense that he sees these popes as "bad" because -- and only because -- they behaved in ways that would make a king a bad king.

Knowing little else about the church in this period, I find myself unable to judge how much I should trust Chamberlin, even on matters that lie within his selected purview. His treatment of Luther strikes me as odd, for example. Noting Leo X's sanguine indifference to Luther, Chamberlin remarks that after all there had been many notable heretics over the centuries who had not presented a real material challenge to the church - and then explains that Leo ought to have realized that a *German* heretic would be a serious threat, because

Germans had always had a unique attitude toward the Roman church:

But Leo had forgotten that Savonarola's supporters had been drawn from the most volatile citizens of a volatile race; while Luther's supporters were those same earnest, dedicated Germans who again and again through the centuries had taken upon themselves the task of cleansing the stables of Rome. Otto the Great, who had descended from Germany six hundred years earlier to establish the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation, share more than a common Saxon ancestry with Martin Luther: The supporters of both saw them as divine instruments and were prepared to back their belief with gold or steel.

For all I know, this is a mainstream or even dominant theory among historians. But if it can explain the initial qualities of Luther's movement, something else is needed to explain why that movement caught on further, among non-Germans -- and then one wonders whether that second explanatory factor could just as well explain the first part, too. What I'm getting at, here, is that this seems like exactly the kind of idea Chamberlin would seize on even if it *didn't* fit the facts, being (as he seems to be) more comfortable with political and blood loyalties than with religion itself. So I am left with a feeling of not entirely trusting my narrator.

Nonetheless, this is an action-packed, intrigue-filled account of a slightly unusual medieval kingdom called the Papal States under the rulership of some of its worse monarchs, if you're into that sort of thing. Just not quite what I thought I was getting into.

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### **Nathan Albright says**

What makes a pope bad? Any institution that goes on for any length of time is going to end up at times with some questionable leadership at the top, but what makes some popes particularly poor choices involves a look at the varied responsibilities and demands that are placed on the papal office as well as the question of how such leaders are chosen. This book is a restrained and balanced look at the failures of some half a dozen popes over the period between 900 and 1550, and the popes chosen here were all notable failures for one reason or another. As counterpoint reading to my readings on and about Luther and the relationship between Germany and Italy in medieval Christianity [1], this book made obvious sense. The author does a good job of placing the medieval papacy within a context that allows one to make sense of its ambitions, its complexity, and ultimately its failures. It takes some bad popes to throw away the legitimacy granted by its position to the point where Christendom is disunited and the city of Rome itself is sacked by an imperial army, as happened in 1527, and this book explains what these bad popes did that was so bad.

The book itself opens with Rome in 900 AD and over more than 250 years proceeds to discuss those popes that brought shame and dishonor on the papal tiara. This is not a book that shows a high degree of criticism of Roman Catholicism or the Papacy as a whole, but rather criticizes those who did the job poorly. The book begins with a discussion of Marozia the Senatrix of Rome, remembered in a garbled history as "Pope Joan" and part of a dynasty of 10th century popes whose local ambitions led the papacy to become embroiled in factionalism and warlordism, always a bad sign for any office. The combination of kingly and papal authority also did not do the Popes well. The book explores the sale of the papacy as well as the way that Papal behavior led to the influence of Germanic Emperors on Italy, generally seen as a bad thing. After this look at the bad popes of the 10th century, the book moves to the late 13th century and gives a critical view of

Pope Boniface VIII, whose ambitions and aggression dramatically led to the rise of the Avignon Popes and to the decline of papal power. Pope Urban VI comes in for a drubbing for his role in fostering the Great Schism. Then the author takes on Pope Alexander VI Borgia and two Medici popes for their role in encouraging the corruption and decadence of the office and their failure to prevent the division of Christendom, with Rome ending up ultimately prostrate to interstate warfare from great powers like France, Spain, and Germany.

So, to answer the question asked, what makes bad popes bad according to this book, the answer is a somewhat complicated one. Bad popes were bad because they tarnished the spiritual authority of their office through flagrant sin, and pursued too much simultaneously, from temporal authority over the fractious city of Rome to dominance over Italy as well as power over the great monarchs of Europe. They were human beings from human backgrounds who often wanted to benefit their families and local communities and sometimes forgot that the spiritual authority of the Papacy depended on the trust that others had in its universality. The fact that the Popes were corrupt Italians, for the most part, with a high degree of condescension towards Germans and others did not help matters either. A result of sordid intrigues, colossal ambitions, and terrible application of realpolitik made the failures of many of these popes fairly obvious and unsurprising. The wonder is that so many popes did such a good job at all of managing to keep everything together despite the tensions and contradictions of the role of the medieval papacy. This is a restrained and worthy effort in explaining the failure of the Papacy between 900AD and the Reformation.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2012...>

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## **Ruth says**

Nobody is more disappointed to be forced to give an one-star review than I am. I almost never pick up a book that I think I might not enjoy -- reading time is just too precious to squander on duds! -- but due to my high interest in this topic I soldiered on through prose so disjointed and obtuse that it nearly broke my brain.

Hoping that someone more well-read than I am in such matters can recommend a book along the same lines that might be a bit easier to digest.

Anyone?

(On a completely unrelated note, I found that I can no longer stumble across the word *verisimilitude* without thinking of The LBD. So at least something positive came out of this experience after all.)

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## **Andrew C. says**

I found this book a decade ago at a musty used book store. When Pope Benedict retired I pulled the book back off the shelf and read it over again. A decade of medieval study have passed since my first reading, and in many ways the book not only holds up, but has improved for me. While the sections on the Borgia Pope, Alexander and the Gaetani Pope Boniface were still the most thorough (due to the prevalence of primary source material I should think), Chamberlin's psychological picture of Emperor Otto the first was interesting and sensitive, a rare thing in profiles of early medieval figures. These profiles, while some of the most successful aspects of the work, also provide the book's weakest scholarly links. Chamberlin makes assumptions of motive that tend to prompt further assumptions and so on until the conclusions are hopelessly extenuating. Don't read it as a work of pure scholarship. Read it because a frightfully arcane subject is brought to vivid and memorable life.

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## **Timothy Urban says**

This is a huge, unwieldy subject, the Popes and their naughtiness, and this book has a heroic go at covering it. Man, they was baaaad. Cash for honours, nepotism, orgies, incest, deceptions, murder are among the milder things these wicked pontiffs get up to. I deduct half a star for the perhaps inevitable need to compress chunks of background information preceding the gritty detail. Mitres off to ER Chamberlin.

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## **Cleverusername2 says**

Sex, sin, greed, a bit of the 'ol ultra-violence, and that's just before 1400! Read The Bad Popes and learn of historical figures such as Marozia and her sister Theodora, the Roman women whom Pope Joan is most likely based upon (created as political satire). In the opening chapters of The Bad Popes Russel Chamberlin traces similarities to the Joan story and the real life Theophylact ladies, it is a deliciously scandalous story. Case in point: their rivals invented the lovely term "Pornocracy", a political system dominated by prostitutes (it was fashionable at that time, as it often is in ours, to label powerful women with such epithets). I love these nasty little tales, they remind me how tumultuous and earthy historical study can be.

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## **N says**

Subjective, sexist, vaguely sourced, but occasionally very insightful as well.

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## **Kathryn says**

What makes a Pope a bad Pope? That, of course, is a question open to debate; but the author of this work (published in 1969, several Popes ago) makes it fairly obvious that power and spirit do not go well together, and that it was when a given Pope was acting both as the Spiritual Leader of Christendom and as the Temporal Monarch of the Papal States of Italy (with heavy emphasis on the latter role) that the Papacy and Rome would run into significant problems. (And, I loved this book, and I am glad that I own it, having

picked it up somewhere or other.)

Essentially, in the fourth century the Emperor Constantine had made Christianity the State Religion of the Roman Empire. This was under the pontificate of Pope Sylvester, of whom not much is known. Four hundred years later, a document appeared known as the Donation of Constantine, in which Constantine (the Emperor) ceded all spiritual power in the Empire, plus the temporal possession of Rome and Italy, to the Papacy. (Although this document was shown several hundred years later to be a forgery, this was long after the Popes became the rulers of the Papal States of Italy.)

The book takes us through the history of Rome and the Papacy, from the ninth century (when Rome and Italy split from the Eastern Roman Empire, and became independent) to 1534, some seven years after the Sack of Rome by unrestrained troops of the Emperor (Charles V of Spain).

Seven Popes in particular are singled out for study in this very readable book. We have John XII (Octavian, 955 - 963), who was the son of the Prince of Rome and became spiritual and temporal ruler of Rome at the age of eighteen (he was alleged to have been killed by an outraged husband, who caught the Pope having intimate relations with his wife). Next is Benedict IX (Theophylact, 1031 - 1046), the grand-nephew of John XII, who obtained the office via his family connections at the age of fourteen (he abdicated at one point, allegedly because he wished to marry, and sold the office of Pope to his godfather, but then he changed his mind). Then we have Boniface VIII (Benedict Gaetani, 1294 - 1303), who, after advising Celestine V (Peter of Morone) how to abdicate the office, became Pope himself and locked up the former Pope; he appropriated lands belonging to other Roman families, used the power and wealth of the Papacy to wage holy war upon the Colonna family, and was captured when the Colonna took revenge for the destruction of the city of Palestrina).

The next four Popes are more familiar to casual readers of history. We have Urban VI (Bartolomeo Prignano, 1378 - 1389), who had spent his prior life as a dour underappreciated church functionary; once he became Pope, he seemed to lose his grip on sanity, going so far as to arrest and torture several Cardinals accused of plotting against him (it was under his watch that the Schism occurred; the cardinals finally elected another Pope, but Urban VI excommunicated the lot of them; after yet a third Pope was elected, it took a Church council to straighten things out). Next is Pope Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia, 1492 - 1503), whose only concern was to use the power and the wealth of Rome to advance the Borgia family, which mainly consisted of his children Cesare, Giovanni, Lucrezia, and Joffré (Cesare especially was noted for casual murders of opponents, and for being absolved by his indulgent father). Finally, we have Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici, 1513 - 1521), who spent the revenues of Rome on art, building projects, and just about everything else (needing money, at one point he sold 31 cardinal's hats for a total of half a million ducats, most of which went to finance his nephew's war against the Duchy of Urbino, when that principality refused to let his nephew come in and take over; and, needing money to finance the building of the new St. Peter's, he authorized the selling of indulgences in Germany, which attracted the attention of Martin Luther). The half-brother of Leo X was Clement VII (Guilio de' Medici, 1523 - 1534), who enraged both the French King and the Emperor by making innumerable treaties with both of them against the other (he then backed the wrong one; he barely escaped to safety when the unrestrained troops of the Emperor sacked Rome in 1527 with such ferocity that in one month two thousand murdered citizens had been thrown into the Tiber).

Although the Popes regarded the loss of the Papal States during the unification of Italy a major disaster (Pope Pius XI ever after lived as a self-proclaimed prisoner in the Vatican), it seems that ceasing to be a monarch of temporal estates was good for the Papacy; for those who live by the sword of rule will die by that same sword, and that the absolute power of rule of great estates is absolutely corrupting.



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## **Belsac says**

I enjoyed the subject but did not enjoy the author.

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## **Nathan Casebolt says**

"The fiscal machinery of the church, with its lines passing through the greatest monarchs down to the humblest country priest, was perhaps the most efficient system ever devised for a continent-wide extraction of gold....[John XXII] destroyed the little friars who had arisen with their terrible heresy that Christ and his disciples had been poor men, that the amassing of wealth was contrary to his teaching."

If you're interested in the theology, liturgy, or rites of the Roman Catholic Church, this book won't help you. If you're interested in the role of the medieval village priest in the lives and fortunes of his flock, keep moving. In you're interested in a soaring history of Christendom from Bethlehem to its third millennium, you won't find that here.

What you will find is exactly what the book promises: a catalog of the worst excesses of seven of the worst prelates ever to occupy the see of Peter, from the rise of the imperial papacy out of the murk of fallen Rome to the vacillations of Pope Clement VII, whose inept double-dealing lost his empire to the kings of Europe and his flock to the Reformation. If the publishers were to retitile the book for a pop-culture audience, they couldn't do worse than "The Lateran Cantina: A Wretched Hive of Scum and Villainy."

Chamberlin doesn't just offer a peek at the skeletons in the Vatican's closet. He pulls them out of the closet, dresses them in sacerdotal finery, and parades them around the room for your horrified, guilty pleasure. However, thankfully, he is not sensationalistic for the sake of sensationalism. He doesn't drown you with lurid or prurient details to attract late-night pay-cable sensibilities. Frankly, he doesn't need to. When you've got a pope getting beaten to death by a cuckolded husband, you don't need to work that hard to achieve shock value.

What I appreciate is the care Chamberlin takes to present as accurate a history of the bad popes as he can. He's careful to debunk some of the more lurid myths (such as the tale of Pope Joan), and is even willing to credit (possibly) a forgery such as the Donation of Constantine to good intentions. This is not a Protestant screed cleverly disguised as history. It's just history, albeit of a sort which casts an unforgiving light on the simony, nepotism, lewdness, debauchery, greed, and lust for power that so often spattered the late-ancient and medieval papacy.

One can even detect a bit of wistfulness in Chamberlin's account of Pope Celestine V, a poor holy man dragged from his beloved cave to be the cardinals's compromise pope. Here, Chamberlin seems to say, was a man whose morality could have risen to the ideals of his office and brought much-needed reform to a church that badly needed a reformer. What could have been had such men occupied the Lateran Palace more frequently? But honest men were no match for the ruthless politics of the papal court, and Celestine's reign was as brief as it was clumsy.

Indeed, one might conclude that the bishopric's location in the City of Rome foredoomed it. Besieged by

powerful Roman families jealous of their ancient privileges, awash in skilled courtiers and double-dealing politicians, the Vatican's fate may have been inevitable, to become nothing more sacred than a weaponized prize for the elite. From the schemes of Roman Senators to the glitz and glam of the Borgias and the Medicis, the history of the throne of Peter is not so much a spiritual meditation as it is a narrative of wealthy and powerful families doing what wealthy and powerful families do: get wealth and power for the family, in order to get more wealth and more power for the family.

"The Bad Popes" is a fast-paced jaunt through the lowest sewers of Christendom, sewers dug by men and women determined to use the kingdom of Heaven to build a kingdom on Earth. The history of the papacy's multiple nadirs well deserves the 14th-century lament of Giovanni de' Mussi with which the book opens: "How is it possible that there has never been any good pope to remedy such evils and that so many wars have been waged for these transient possessions. Truly we cannot serve God and Mammon at the same time, cannot stand with one foot in Heaven and the other on Earth."

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## **Mer says**

Interesting read, had some good info but there seemed to be chunks of time left out that I'd've liked to have known about.

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