

POPE JOAN

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1970 the British public has been treated to several books, a radio drama and a London stage play, asserting that at one time a woman reigned as pope. A full length film in 1972, entitled "Pope Joan", also presented her as its central character. This film when shown in America was called 'The Devil's Imposture'. From these various sources many people have gained the impression that she was a real historical person. Others, while doubting the full story, have been left with a feeling that part of it may have been true.

Although there is a long history for this legend, it is completely fictitious. The basic account upon which the story is based is ascribed to Martin Polonus, a reputable Dominican historian, who lived in the 13th century. The account may be translated as follows:

After the aforesaid Leo, John, an Englishman by descent (Johannes Anglicus natione/nativitate) who came from Mainz, held the See two years, five months and four days, and the pontificate was vacant one month. He died at Rome. He, it is asserted, was a woman. And having been in youth taken by her lover to Athens in man's clothes, she made such progress in various sciences that there was nobody equal to her. So that afterwards lecturing on the Trivium at Rome she had great masters for her disciples and hearers. And forasmuch as she was in great esteem in the city, both for her life and her learning, she was unanimously elected pope. But while pope she became pregnant by the person with whom she was intimate. But not knowing the time of her delivery, while going from St. Peter's to the Lateran, being taken in labour, she brought forth a child between the Coliseum and St. Clement's church. And afterwards dying, she was, it is said, buried in that place. And because the Lord Pope always turns aside from that way, there are some who are fully persuaded that it is done in detestation of the fact. Nor is she put in the Catalogue of the Holy Popes, as well on account of her female sex as on account of the foul nature of the transaction ((HT 6)).

[The reference to Leo in this passage is to Leo IV].

In another translation, 'John, an Englishman by descent ...' is rendered as, 'John Anglicus ...' with the second word being treated as a surname ((RDP 11)). Those who have promoted the story of a female pope, have also pointed to the writings of other reputable chroniclers, Roman customs and the acceptance of the story by later popes.

SO WHAT ARE THE FACTS?

Leo IV was pope from 847 till July 17th 855. The coronation of Benedict III took place on 29th September of the same year and he lived till 858. So there is no room for a John Anglicus (John English) to have reigned for 2 1/2 years between them. This period of history is well documented and the succession of Benedict III within a few months of Leo's death is well attested. For example:

1) Representatives were sent by the bishop of Rheims in 855 with documents to Leo IV. While on their way they heard of Leo's death and on arrival in Rome learnt of Benedict's election. This indicates a short period between Leo's death and Benedict's election ((RDP 39-40)).

2) Once Benedict was elected, the approval of Lothair the Emperor, who lived in Gaul, was required before the coronation could proceed. The Emperor was dying, so his approval was not received quickly. Anastasius, a priest who had been condemned by Pope Leo IV for neglecting his duties, used this delay to imprison Benedict and take possession of the papal throne. There was uproar amongst the people and within a few weeks the Imperial envoy recognised Benedict III. Anastasius was overthrown and the coronation of Benedict followed on September 29th of the same year. In the reports of this controversy there is no mention of a woman posing as pope ((RDP 38-40)).

3) Anastasius, who had been at the centre of the dispute, later wrote a book in which he records that there was less than three months between Leo and Benedict. He made no mention of a female pope ((RDP 12-14)).

4) Lothair died the day before Benedict was crowned, but it took some time for this news to reach Rome. So the commemorative coins of the coronation named Lothair as emperor on one side and Benedict as pope on the other. As the emperor died in 855, this again indicates that Benedict became pope in that year ((RDP 39)).

5) A decretal issued by Benedict III for the monastery at Corbie is dated October 7th 855 ((RDP 38)).

6) Pope Nicholas I, who reigned from 858-867, mentioned on several occasions that he succeeded Benedict III who had succeeded Leo IV ((RDP 40)).

7) During Benedict's reign, a dispute occurred as to whether Photius or Ignatius should be patriarch of Constantinople. Pope Nicholas I sent legates to adjudicate. They supported Photius, but Pope Nicholas disavowed them, declaring for Ignatius. Photius replied by writing serious but polemical anti-Roman works. If a woman pope had reigned less than two years previously, he would not have ignored the scandal. Yet he clearly accepted that Benedict III followed Leo IV ((RDP 40)).

8) English chroniclers paid special attention to Pope Leo IV. When Alfred the Great was a small boy he was taken to Rome by king Aethelwulf, his father. While there, Alfred received the sacrament of Confirmation from Leo IV himself. If John Anglicus was at the time a distinguished Englishman or of English descent, as he is alleged to have been, and was at the centre of church affairs, Aethelwulf and his retinue would certainly have met him. Yet the English chroniclers, always interested in reporting the fame of those connected with their own race, make no mention of him ((HT 9)).

9) In 1020, Pope Leo IX accused the church at Constantinople of permitting abuses. As an example, he said that by permitting a eunuch to be a patriarch, it may have had a woman patriarch at one time. Leo would not have chosen such an argument if 165 years earlier there had been a woman pope. It is also noteworthy that Constantinople did not refer to this alleged incident in its reply ((HT 10)).

10) Not one contemporary chronicler nor one letter written anywhere in Rome or Europe mentioned a pope who had given birth in public. Yet this would have been the news story of the age.

THE INTERPOLATION

The first mention of John Anglicus appeared more than 400 years after his 'reign'. Martin von Trappau, usually known as Martin Polonus as he was from Poland, became papal chaplain. While in Rome he took advantage of being close to the Vatican archives to write a history of the popes. His book recorded Benedict III following Leo IV in the usual manner. Although the earliest editions of his book give no hint of a female pope, those published a few years later contain the story as related above. It can be seen to have been squeezed into the margin and added to the foot of a page of the manuscript. It was the manuscripts containing this interpolation which were copied and spread throughout the known world. Martin's position, as papal chaplain, gave his book a semi-official status within Christendom. It became the authoritative history of the popes and was used in all teaching establishments.

Under normal circumstances, someone with access to the Vatican archives would no doubt have challenged the story during the following years. But circumstances were not normal. As soon as Polonus finished writing in about 1275 he left Rome for Polani and died on the journey. In 1303 a French army occupied Rome and captured the pope. The short reign of his successor was followed by a year in which the papal chair was vacant due to French interference. Eventually French pressure ensured that one of its countrymen, Clement V, was elected in 1305. He never left his native land. This 'papal captivity' in France of the popes lasted till 1367, when Urban V visited Rome for three years. As it was controlled by brigands he retreated to France. A permanent return to Rome was not achieved till 1377.

During these 72 years of exile the Black Death devastated the peoples of Europe. In an attempt to staff the parishes and monasteries, men of less than normal abilities were admitted to the priesthood. The standard of education fell and there was little time for research. By 1377 all Europe, including the pope, believed the interpolation to be true history. Even after the return to Rome, social unrest was not conducive to quiet study for some years.

OTHER CHRONICLES

Those who assert that a woman pope existed have pointed to Chronicles predating Martin Polonus, which allude to her. The main ones are:

Liber Pontificalis by Anastasius in the 9th century ((HT 12)).

Historiographi by Marianus Scotus of 1083 ((HT 12)).

The Chronographia of Sigeburt of Gemblourx, 1105-1112 ((HT 12)).

A History of the Popes by Bishop Otto of Frisingen, 1146 ((HT 12)).

A History by Richard of Poitiers of 1172 ((HT 12)).

The Pantheon by Gotfrid of Viterbo, about 1186 ((HT 12)).

A History by Gervase of Tibury in 1214 ((HT 12)).

But in all these cases the earliest manuscripts fail to mention a woman pope. It is in editions produced some time after 1275 that she appears. Close examination shows that when these books were republished after that date, the opportunity was taken to add the additional information to be found in Polonus's work. In several instances a note was added stating that the additional material was 'according to Polonus' ((HT 2 and RDP 14-16)). So, although these Chronicles were first written at times prior to Polonus, they do not provide any independent evidence of a female pope.

CUSTOMS

Following the return of the papacy to Rome in 1377, the flow of business visitors, tourists and pilgrims increased greatly. A tourist guide, 'Mirabilia Urbis Romae' was published which not only repeated the accepted history of 'John Anglicus' but added ideas of its own. Visitors wanted to see the place of 'the birth', so an inscribed memorial appeared. A statue was erected, or an earlier one designated, alongside the road. These satisfied the tourist trade, but there is no evidence of their existence prior to 1377.

It was traditional for the pope to travel in procession from his palace to the Lateran, not along the direct road but by a longer route. This tradition appears to have become established long before 1275, as it is unlikely that the author of the interpolation would have referred to an event which his contemporaries would have known was untrue. This route continued to be used until near the close of the 16th century. It was the Interpolation in Polonus's work that introduced the notion of the detour being made in order to show abhorrence of the street in which the pope gave birth. But after the papal return to Rome in 1377 this reason was accepted as part of the John Anglicus story. In 1486 the pope deliberately took the shorter route in order to destroy this superstition. The generally accepted opinion today is that the direct route was narrow and could be used only with difficulty. It is also possible that it would have disrupted traders, as the pope had to travel frequently to and from the Lateran. In 1590 the road was widened and thereafter used for the procession.

An impressive marble throne, amongst other museum pieces, was kept at the Vatican. This throne had a hole in the seat and may have been originally used in the Roman baths. A rumour spread that it was used at papal consecrations, in order that the pope's sex might be checked during the ceremony, so as to avoid a repeat of the previous error. Such a procedure is not mentioned in the Ordo Romaus, which contained directions for the consecration ceremonial.

DOCTRINE

One reason for urgency not being given to challenging the story was that it did not impinge upon doctrine. It is the bishop of Rome who assumes the authority of Pope. As the Church considers that She does not possess the power to consecrate as woman as a priest or bishop, any ceremony of 'consecration' involving a woman would have no effect. All the chroniclers therefore treated her as not being a real pope, and considered that the See of Rome was vacant during her years o' alleged imposture.

An argument used by John Huss, at the Council of Constance in 1414-5, was that when the Church was without a pope, whilst the impostor (he called her pope Agnes) was sitting in the papal chair, the Church of Christ did not cease to function. His opponents did not challenge the historical accuracy of his statement, but denied that the circumstance had a doctrinal significance ((RDP 36)).

OTHER 'POPE JOANS'

A glance at a list of pontiffs shows that Pope John XX does not appear. This has led to the assertion that he was 'Pope Joan'. But this is not so. John XIV reigned from 983-4 and John XV from 985-6. For a period in between, a powerful man gained control of Rome and proclaimed himself pope. He kept Pope John XIV in prison for four months, where he died. Hundreds of years later the opinion grew that the pope who had been imprisoned was a different John to John XIV and should have been designated John XV. This would mean that all the popes with the name of John after this date would be incorrectly numbered. So when another John became pope 300 years later, he styled himself John XXI rather than XX. Later historians established that the original numbering had been correct. But that the muddle had led to the omission of a John XX. This temporary doubt concerned an incident 130 years after the alleged existence of John Anglicus.

LATER HISTORY

The earliest evidence that educated people doubted the legend is contained in the correspondence of the bishop of Siena in 1451. But, although he privately questioned the story, the statue of the mythical pope was not removed from his cathedral. An indication of the difficulty of challenging the 'established wisdom' may be seen in a letter written by the prefect of the Vatican Library in 1479. Writing to a friend about the story he added, 'These things that I have mentioned are popularly told, though by obscure and untrustworthy authors, therefore I have related them briefly and plainly, so that I should not be thought obstinate and pertinacious in omitting that which almost everyone asserts to be true'. So in the next half century the story was relegated by the educated class to that of myth, although it still held sway amongst the less learned. No doubt it would have died out in the following years if the Protestant revolt had not occurred in the 16th century. The story of a pope giving birth to an illegitimate baby became part of Protestant polemics, and was incorporated into the state imposed history as taught in Protestant countries. It was Protestant writers who invented the name 'Joan'.

But during the 19th century even Protestant countries accepted that the story was false, only to be kept alive into the 20th by small sects. The recent revival has been due to a small number of writers, often male, misusing the feminist movement as a vehicle for spreading the fable.

ORIGIN OF THE MYTH

While the story of a woman pope can be shown to have been a myth, the question arises as to how and why it arose. Any answer can only be a conjecture, but there are clues.

The Chronicle Salernitanum of around 980 recounts that during the reign of Charlemagne, the patriarch of Constantinople kept a niece in his palace disguised as a eunuch. On the Patriarch's death she was elected to replace him. The Chronicle went on to relate that Prince Arichis of Benevento was informed by a devil in a dream about this 'niece'. Arichis sent envoys to Constantinople and the woman was deposed ((RDP 57)). Charlemagne reigned from 768-814 and, from the context of the passage, we also know that it occurred during the reign of a Pope Stephan. Stephan IV was pope from 768-772, and from 766-780 Nicetas was patriarch. It is also known that Nicetas was a eunuch, as they were not barred from the priesthood if their state was not due to self-mutilation. In the eastern part of the Church the clergy were not permitted to shave. As Nicetas was probably unable to grow a beard, he would have appeared womanly ((RDP 57)). The Benevento area of Italy was at that time part of the Byzantine Empire ruled from Constantinople. So the story may have been a part of a politically motivated move to undermine the authority of the Emperor, who had agreed to the election of Nicetas. There is no evidence that Nicetas was removed from office ((RDP 57)), but the story became well known in Italy.

In 1054 the church at Constantinople rebelled against the authority of Rome and during that year Pope Leo IX wrote to the Patriarch accusing his church of having been careless in observing Holy Law. An extract reads, 'God forbid that we wish to believe, what public opinion does not hesitate to claim, has happened for the Church of Constantinople; namely that in promoting eunuchs indiscriminately against the First Law of the Council of Nicaea, it once raised a woman to the seat of its pontiff'. He went on to say that from the way Constantinople was acting the event could easily have happened. It is quite possible that it was this story which re-emerged in a garbled form somewhere in Western Europe hundreds of years later. While the title of 'pontiff' was used widely in the east, in the west it soon came to refer only to the bishop of Rome. This could have been a cause of confusion to someone living in northern Europe. It is noticeable that it was a 'Pope Leo' involved, in both the incident of the letter and the story of John Anglicus ((RDP 58)). Also, the usurper is exposed by an 'evil spirit' in both the Arichis story, and in one of the first to hint at a female pope (Chronica Minor Exphordensis) of about 1270 ((HT 5)).

WHY WAS THE INTERPOLATION ADDED TO POLONUS'S BOOK?

Again, it is only possible to speculate on the bases of a few clues. The first hint of a female pope is to be found in *Chronica Universalis Mettensis*, written by an unknown author ((HT 2)). In it appears the note, 'Query, With regard to a certain pope, or rather popes, because she was a woman who pretended to be a man .. On a certain day, when he was riding, he gave birth to a child ' ((H1 3)). This passage was inserted between the years 1099 and 1100, when Paschal II was pope. Soon afterwards, John de Mailly repeats the 'Query' in his book ((RDP 16)). Stephen de Bourbon copied the story a few years later and, allowing himself to be carried away by indignation, treated it as factual, although he did add 'as is alleged in the chronicles' ((HT 4)). A more concise version then appeared in '*Chronica Minor Exphordensis*', the author admitting that the name and date of the 'false pope' was not known ((HT 5)). These books would have been circulating while Martin Polonus was researching in the Vatican archives and they would very likely have been brought to his notice.

Some friars at this time were disgruntled because the Pope had limited their activities. This could have led to a spirit which wished to ridicule the workings of the papacy. The story of a female pope reigning in 1099 did not last long, but the year 855 came to be asserted. When Polonus ignored this uneducated gossip, some friars may have felt this to be a humiliating exposure of their gullibility.

As soon as his book was finished, Polonus left Rome to become a bishop in Poland, but died the following year. This would have left the defeated individuals with the opportunity to press the person, who had been left to multiply copies of the book to include a reference to their opinions. Books had to be copied out by hand at that time. They could have argued that for a book to be complete it should at least mention this figure of contention. For the sake of peace and unity the person in charge would have been tempted to allow some mention of 'John Angilicus'. It is most noteworthy, and of great significance, that the addition to Polonus's work does not say that John Angilicus existed. We read, 'He, it is asserted was a woman ... And afterwards dying, she was, it is said ... there are some who are fully persuaded that ...'

So this one interpolated paragraph, written by an unknown hand, upon which the whole legend has been based, was recording some unsupported speculations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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THE FEMALE POPE by Rosemary and Darroll Pardoe, 1988, ISBN 1 85274 013 2 (referred to above as RDP). This book contains a documented bibliography, a review of 'Pope Joan' as portrayed in modern fictional writings, notes on her appearance on Tarot Cards, and a survey of women who disguised themselves as men in history.

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