

Bad Popes

James J. Drummey
(Endnotes not by authors)



Popes Alexander VI, Boniface VIII, and Clement VII

Q. How many of the more than 260 Popes would you characterize as being corrupt? — G.P., Florida

A. It is generally agreed by historians that four or five Popes were guilty of serious moral lapses.⁽¹⁾ Some critics of the Church have tried to use this information to undermine the Catholic teaching on infallibility. But they are confusing infallibility (the inability of the Holy Father to teach error when he speaks [ex *cathedra*] on a matter of faith and morals) with impeccability (the inability of the Holy Father to commit a sin). The Church has never claimed impeccability for any Pope, although many of them have lived lives of extraordinary holiness,⁽²⁾ because we are all sinners, but it has claimed the charism of infallibility for every Pope because of Christ's promises to be with His Church all days, and never to let the gates of Hell prevail against it.

The fact that some Popes were wicked in their private lives is no argument against the truth of the Catholic Church, anymore than immoral conduct by an American President is an argument against the goodness of the United States. In fact, it is an argument for the reliability of the Church since it continued during the reign of those unworthy Popes to teach faithfully the truths handed down by Christ and the Apostles and suffered no lasting harm from the immoral conduct of a tiny percentage of its leaders.

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The Scandal of the Bad Popes

Patrick Madrid

[Accusation:] *The most powerful evidence against the papacy being biblical is the record of the popes themselves. There have been numerous bad popes,⁽³⁾ men who murdered, stole, were greedy, arrogant, violent and incredibly immoral. This alone disqualifies the papacy as being part of Christ's plan for His Church. There's no way He would have entrusted the "papacy" to sinful men.*



Main cast of the Showtime series, *The Borgias*

Then how do you account for Christ entrusting the office of Apostle to sinful men like Judas? He was one of the Lord's hand-picked protégés. He was a pretty sinful character, yet he was an Apostle! In fact, at one time or another, Scripture tells us that all the Apostles failed to live according to Christ's commands. Though they never appear to have slipped into sexual immorality, the Apostles did blunder their way into plenty of other sins before the New Testament story was finished.

By turns they were violent (Peter cut off the ear of the high priest's servant in the Garden of Gethsemane), vain (they bickered bitterly more than once over which of them would be highest in heaven), lazy ("Can you not stay awake with me one hour?" Christ asked them as they slept during his agony in the Garden), and disbelieving (Christ identified him by name as a "devil," one of those who refused to believe His teaching on the Eucharist in John 6:70-71). The Apostles were cowardly (running away from Christ when he was taken into custody by the Jews). Peter denied three times, once under oath, even knowing his Lord.

Clearly, Christ entrusted the role of Apostle to weak, even at times wicked men. But does that fact somehow disqualify them from fulfilling the purpose for which He called them? Of course not. God's grace is more powerful than man's sin, and the same is true when it comes to the papacy.⁽⁴⁾

The good, the bad, and the ugly

Yes, there have been some wicked popes. Corruption, immorality, even murder, were sins committed by some bishops of Rome. But what does that prove, except that

they, like the Apostles, were not always faithful to the graces God gave them? This is true of all of us, to one extent or another. The fact that there have been bad popes – and that's a fact no Catholic disputes – does not disprove the doctrine of the papacy. Why? Because as we've seen, Christ entrusts important work to men who are sinners. He offers them all the grace necessary to be faithful and holy, even though some spurn those graces and choose sin anyway.

Another problem with this fiction is that it seems to assume that *all* the popes have been scoundrels. That's very far from the truth. The fact is, most of the popes have been good – even heroically good – men. They have been, on the whole, good examples of Christian virtue and perseverance in the apostolate. That fact is very easily forgotten by critics of the papacy.

And there's another issue here. Scripture is clear that God can and does confer special teaching authority on men even if they are sinful. One striking example concerns Caiaphas, the high priest at the time of Christ's Crucifixion:

Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing, nor do you consider that it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish.' He did not say this on his own, but since he was high priest for that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to kill him. (John 11:49-55)

This is a good example of God using a sinful man – a *wicked* man, it seems – to utter inspired prophecy. The Holy Spirit spoke through his lips, in spite of the fact that Caiaphas was actively plotting to kill Jesus.

One bad apple don't spoil the whole bunch

Another episode that illustrates this point, though from a different angle, is found in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus points to the Jewish leaders and reminds his audience that they possessed a God-given authority to teach. This authority was valid even though many of them were corrupt.⁽⁵⁾

Christ later calls them “hypocrites,” a “brood of vipers,” “blind guides,” “whitened sepulchres full of dead men's bones.” The Lord made it clear that even though these men were personally corrupt and unworthy of their position of authority, they nonetheless had that authority:

Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying, 'The Scribes and Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses.* *Therefore, do and observe*

all the things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice.' (Matthew 23:1-3)

In the same way, the Lord commissioned sinful, weak, impetuous Simon Peter to feed His sheep and tend His flock, to carry the keys of the kingdom of heaven, to bind and loose in His name and with His authority, to strengthen the other Apostles in times of crisis and uncertainty, to be the rock on which the Church would be built. Peter's successors, the popes, continue in that ministry. Some fulfilled it poorly, hobbled by the chains of sin and personal failings, but most carried out the task well, many of them completing their sacred ministry with martyrdom; their supreme effort to "strengthen their brothers."

* The Greek phrase here, *tés Mouséos kathédras*, the chair of Moses, is the classic Scriptural text that coincides with the Catholic teaching on the Chair of Peter. This is the source of the Latin term for the pope's teaching authority: *ex cathedra* (i.e., "from the chair").

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ENDNOTES

(1) The great Catholic apologist and publisher Frank Sheed (1897-1981) cautioned against such a simplistic tallying of papal sinners for purposes of claiming "there were only six bad popes out of 260, and that the Apostles had a far worse average, one traitor in twelve." He notes that the number six is "arrived at by ignoring all the Commandments save one – the Sixth as it chanced – and assuming that only six popes had ever sinned against that one. There are of course other sins and worse sins: some of them can be in the depth of the soul, where only God can see them. We learned soon enough that one cannot list good popes and bad popes in two columns, gratified that the bad column is so much the shorter" (*The Church and I*, Doubleday, 1974, p.62).

American theologian George Weigel once said that "being Americans we tend to focus on sex and money" but for him, "the really religiously corrupting aspects of the most difficult period in the history of the papacy [which he identifies as the late medieval] had to do with the Church's entanglement with state power" ("In Depth," Book TV, June 1, 2008).

(2) Asked about the Borgia popes in a 2008 television interview, Catholic author and columnist George Weigel responded, "I remember a wonderful *National Geographic* coffee-table book on the Vatican, it was published maybe 15 years ago. And in it an elderly priest has a wonderful line.... He said, 'God has been very kind to us. We haven't had a wicked pope in 500 years.' I think that's about right! Which is not a bad run for any institution" ("In Depth," Book TV, June 1, 2008). Of course that does not exclude any number of unexceptional sinners or morally mediocre popes.

The *Annuario Pontificio* (the *Pontifical Yearbook*) lists a total of 265 popes in the Church's two thousand year history. Of that number 78 are called "Saint" (including the first 35 bishops of Rome) and another eleven are called "Blessed" (including John XIII and John Paul II). Beatification is the penultimate step before canonization. One pope is titled "Venerable" (Pius XII) and two as "Servants of God" (Paul VI and John Paul I) – the first of the four steps to canonization. This should not be interpreted to mean that these are the only popes that lived lives of deep faith and Christian virtue. It simply means that these are the ones that some influential person or group created the impetus to at least start the process of canonization.

(3) The most popular book in English on the subject, *The Bad Popes*, was published in 1969 (the year after Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*). Written by historian Eric Russell Chamberlin (1926-2006), it highlighted the immoral lives of seven or eight of the most notorious pontiffs (reigning years included in parenthesis) and gave dishonourable mention to some of their predecessors:

Pope Stephen VI (896-897), who had his predecessor, Pope Formosus, exhumed, his rotting corpse vested and propped up on a throne, tried, de-fingered, briefly reburied, and thrown in the Tiber. Later that same year Stephen was imprisoned and strangled.

Pope John XII (937-964) was a member of the powerful and corrupt Theophylact family – who appointed popes for the first sixty years of the 10th century. He became pope when only 16 to 18 years of age. John was an inveterate womanizer and gambler, whose licentiousness led to the Lateran being spoken of as a brothel, and who invoked Zeus and Venus when playing dice. A contemporary historian accuses him of accepting payment to ordain a ten year-old bishop in the city of Todi. John had several episcopal opponents tortured and killed. He died eight days after he had been, according to rumour, stricken by paralysis while in the act of adultery.

Pope Benedict IX (1032-1044, 1045, 1047-1048) was the last member of the Theophylact family to sit on the papal throne. His father obtained it for him when he was 18 to 20 years of age. He was accused of numerous counts of fornication, rape and murder and was twice expelled from Rome, only to return. In 1048 he resigned the papacy to pursue marriage and sold the office to his pious godfather. Charged with simony the following year, he refused to appear and was excommunicated.

Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) encouraged his saintly predecessor, Celestine V, to resign the papacy, only to imprison him for the remainder of his life upon election. He had many bitter quarrels with the Habsburg Emperor, the King of France, King of Sicily, and the powerful Colonna family of Rome. His quarrel with Dante led to the poet lampooning Boniface in his *Divine Comedy*, putting the pontiff in the Eighth Circle of Hell for simony.

Pope Urban VI (1378-1389), who went from being a devout and learned monk to an obstinate, imprudent and violent pope. Some of his Curia thought him a madman. When several of his cardinals conspired against him, Urban had them seized, tortured and killed.

Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503), a Borgia, who was guilty of nepotism and fornication. While a Cardinal he had four children, including Cesare and Lucrezia, by his then favourite mistress. He made Cesare the Archbishop of Valencia at age 17. While Alexander VI has become the "poster boy" for papal corruption, his alleged misdeeds are similar in nature to those of other Renaissance princes. But as the French philosopher Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) noted in his work *Du Pape* (1819), "The [popes] are

forgiven nothing, because everything is expected from them, wherefore the vices lightly passed over in a Louis XIV become most offensive and scandalous in an Alexander VI.”

Pope Leo X (1513-1521), a member of the Medici family, who was probably too preoccupied with papal and family politics to adequately respond to Martin Luther’s challenge (dismissing it as a “monk’s squabble”) that ignited the Protestant Reformation. He was a spendthrift whose lavishness quickly exhausted papal funds and precipitated a financial crisis from which his pontificate never emerged. He is remembered for granting indulgences for those who donated to the reconstruction of Saint Peter’s Basilica.

Pope Clement VII (1523–1534), like Leo X, was a member of the Medici family. Power-politicking got him caught between France, Spain, and Germany and led to the Holy Roman Emperor’s army sacking Rome in 1527.

Another book on the same subject, Peter De Rosa’s *Vicars of Christ: The Dark Side of the Papacy* (Crown Publ., 1988), covers much the same territory but in a more sensationalistic fashion. De Rosa is a former Jesuit, now married, who dissents from the Church’s teaching on contraception, divorce, clerical celibacy, papal infallibility, etc. – the usual roster. He appears less concerned with historical context and fairness than with casting papal misdemeanours in the worst possible light so as to discredit papal authority. De Rosa was scriptwriter for the popular British television comedy series, “Bless Me, Father,” based on his novels.

(4) Frank Sheed expands on this fundamental point in *The Church and I*:

Upon the human failings of popes and bishops...we of the [Catholic Evidence] Guild were the best-instructed body of laymen in the Church's history. And none of this dimmed either our loyalty to our own bishop, or our certainty that from papacy and hierarchy the Holy Spirit would see to it that we got true doctrine and true sacraments. Unworthy pastors were the Holy Spirit's problem, not ours. It took us a while to grow into this knowledge. At the beginning we had a general notion that there had been some morally eccentric popes (but they had never defined anything!). We had not a notion of the tidal wave of papal and hierarchical ill-doing that was to break over us.

...But, looking simply at what history records, while we may feel that the popes present a magnificent totality, they have their souls to save. I am devoted to the papacy – without it there would be hundreds of debates and no adjudicator for any of them. I hope that if the test came I should die rather than deny it, as St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher did – though in their boyhood they had lived under Alexander VI and they went to their deaths under Clement VII. I admire all the popes I have lived under, but there have been some whom no one could admire. For them and for us, Christ is the point.

...We were there to introduce people to Christ's Church. We were not prettying the Church for its photograph. Still less were we like lawyers with a shady client, trying to keep his worst crimes from the jury's knowledge. We had to show them the Church Christ founded exactly as it was and is. If they were scandalized by what they saw, they must take it up with Christ, who founded it, or with the Holy Spirit, who vivifies it.

...However ill [Christ] might be served by his representative at any given time, we could still find in his Church, as nowhere else, life and truth and the possibility of union with him to the limit of our willingness.

(5) If the flawed character of popes or bishops is proof against the divine origins of the Catholic Church and papal authority then why is it not likewise proof against the religious claims of the ancient kingdom of Israel and Protestantism? When the Israelites demanded a monarchy, Saul was selected by God through the prophet Samuel to be their first king. Yet he proved unworthy of the office and eventually committed suicide (1 Sam. 31:4). Next came King David, “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14), to whom authorship of the Psalms is attributed and through whom God entered into a special covenant with His people (2 Samuel 7). Yet David committed adultery with the wife of his loyal general, Uriah the Hittite, and then plotted the innocent man’s death. To Israel’s third king, Solomon, God gave “a wise and discerning heart” like no other (1 Kgs. 3:11-12; 10:24). Solomon built the first Temple in Jerusalem and is traditionally attributed authorship of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Yet he was a spendthrift who quickly depleted the royal treasury. Needing funds to pay for the costly imported materials used in his many building projects and to maintain his extravagant lifestyle Solomon taxed his people heavily, and what he could not pay for in taxes he paid for in land and people. He gave twenty towns to foreign powers, and he paid Phoenicia in slave labour: 30,000 men had to perform labour for the King of Tyre (1 Kgs. 5:1-18). Solomon was a sensual man who had a harem of 700 wives and 300 concubines. He was even an idolater who disobeyed God in marrying non-Hebrew women and then built altars and temples to their pagan gods, and worshipped at them himself (1 Kgs 11:1-8). Groaning under the oppression of Solomon, the Hebrews became discontent, so that upon his death (c. 926-922 BC) the ten northern tribes revolted. Unwilling to be ruled by Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, these tribes successfully seceded and established their own kingdom. The empire of David and Solomon was gone, never to be seen again. Examining the character of the subsequent monarchs of the divided kingdom one could reckon all the kings of Israel as bad and the majority of the kings of Judah the same. While some might retort that God did not intend for Israel to be ruled by a hereditary monarchy, in fact warned them about it (1 Sam. 8:8-19), that does not negate the fact that Bible-believing Christians and Jews hold that God did establish the Davidic royal lineage and that Israel continued and even deepened its covenant relationship with God during the monarchic period, despite any misrule or personal sins of the various kings. Why should God’s New Covenant relationship with the “New Israel” – the Church – be any different?

Serious defects of character can also be found among the “big three” leaders of the Reformation, men Protestant’s believe were led by the Holy Spirit. Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a coarse man whose vulgar and obscene language shocked friend and foe alike. His bombastic personality and polemical style made his writings confusing, as he frequently seemed to affirm and deny the same point on different occasions. One biographer explains: “For, like his doctrines and his writings, Luther’s life was a mass of contradictions arising from the neurotic temperament” (Frantz Funck-Brentano, *Luther*, 1936). Luther confessed, “I am but a man prone to let himself be swept off his feet by society, drunkenness, the torments of the flesh” (*Table Talk*, Weimar edition, 9,215,13). In later life he blamed his physical ailments on excessive wine and Satan. In 1539 one of his princely protectors, Philip I of Hesse, petitioned Luther for permission to take a second wife. Luther’s right-hand man, Philip Melancthon, wrote a document sanctioning bigamy, based on Old Testament precedent, that was signed by Luther and six other reformers including Martin Bucer. However they advised Philip to keep his double marriage secret. Luther encouraged the deceit, saying “a secret ‘yes’ must remain a public ‘no’ and vice versa” (Wilhelm de Wette, *Dr. Luther’s Briefe*, vol.6,263). In his later years Luther became fiercely anti-Jewish, writing a letter entitled “The Jews and Their Lies,” in which he called upon Christians to destroy their holy texts, forbid their rabbis to teach, set fire to their synagogues, schools and houses, and to eject them from the country. In his pamphlet “Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants” he endorsed the violent suppression of the

peasant uprising (1524-25), that cost maybe one hundred thousand lives, by invoking Romans 13:1-7 as justification for Germany's ruling class to "cut them down, slaughter and stab them, openly or in secret." And of course he favoured violence against Catholics: "The emperor, kings, and princes" should "attack this plague [the Romanists] of all the earth no longer with words but with the sword" and "wash our hands in their blood."

French theologian Jean Calvin (1509-64) exercised tremendous influence on the laws and mores of his adopted Geneva. He proved to be a most tyrannical authority, consumed by the rightness of his vision of Christian living and imposing it on the population regardless of the misery it caused. Historian Will Durant gives an impression of what it was like to live in Calvin's Geneva:

Calvin himself, austere and severe, dreamed of a community so well regulated that its virtue would prove his theology, and would shame the Catholicism that had produced or tolerated the luxury and laxity of Rome. Discipline should be the backbone of personality, enabling it to rise out of the baseness of human nature to the erect stature of the self-conquered man....To regulate lay conduct a system of domiciliary visits was established: one or another of the elders visited, yearly, each house in the quarter assigned to him, and questioned the occupants on all phases of their lives. Consistory and Council joined in the prohibition of gambling, card-playing, profanity, drunkenness, the frequenting of taverns, dancing (which was then enhanced by kisses and embraces), indecent or irreligious songs, excess in entertainment, extravagance in living, immodesty in dress. The allowable color and quantity of clothing, and the number of dishes permissible at a meal, were specified by law. Jewelry and lace were frowned upon. A woman was jailed for arranging her hair to an immoral height. Theatrical performances were limited to religious plays, and then these too were forbidden....To speak disrespectfully of Calvin or the clergy was a crime. A first violation of these ordinances was punished with a reprimand, further violation with fines, persistent violation with imprisonment or banishment. Fornication was to be punished with exile or drowning; adultery, blasphemy, or idolatry, with death. In one extraordinary instance a child was beheaded for striking its parents. In the years 1558-59 there were 414 prosecutions for moral offenses; between 1542 and 1564 there were seventy-six banishments and fifty-eight executions; the total population of Geneva was then about 20,000. As everywhere in the sixteenth century, torture was often used to obtain confessions or evidence. (*The Reformation*, 1957, pp. 473-74)

A child who had called his mother a devil, and flung a stone at her, was publicly whipped and suspended by his arms to a gallows as a sign that he deserved death (J. M. V. Audin, *History of the Life, Works, and Doctrines of John Calvin*). The Geneva Council sometimes reacted to the severity of Calvin's codes and moderated them. Yet Calvin justified the harsh punishments, even of children, with appeals to Old Testament levitical law. Attendance at Sunday services was compulsory and citizens were routinely questioned by authorities as to their attendance. Everyone was encouraged to spy on everyone else. Every unbecoming word, even heard in the street, was to be made known to the Consistory. Some men who laughed while Calvin was preaching were put in prison for three days and forced to publicly repent. In 1547 the embryonic freethinker Jacques Gruet was tortured and beheaded for publicly criticizing Calvin, as well as for privately holding heretical ideas. In 1553 the Spanish physician-writer and anti-trinitarian Michael Servetus was passing through Geneva. At Calvin's behest he was arrested, tried and burned at the stake for heresy (some apologists reply that Calvin only wanted him beheaded).

Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), like Luther, was a former Catholic priest. In 1518 he was accused of seducing a girl of good family. In a letter to Heinrich Utinger (dated December 5th and still preserved) Zwingli denied that he had seduced her but that “she seduced me with more than flattering words.” “That girl,” he said, “was a ‘virgin’ during the day and a ‘woman’ at night” (Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation in Its Own Words*, 1964: 115-16). He confessed to having had sexual relations with other women in the past but with the scruple that he had never dishonoured a “virgin, nun or married woman.” Zwingli was jealous of the growing influence of Luther and claimed that “the doctrine of Christ” was taught to him by “the Word of God” before Luther was ever heard of in Switzerland. In 1524 he married a comely widow with whom he had been cohabiting for two years (his defenders claim there was an earlier secret marriage). Zwingli’s attitude appears ambiguous toward the repression of the Anabaptists by his political disciples – which escalated from imprisonment and fines, to torture, banishment and finally death (possibly 5,000 killed in Switzerland in the first ten years of Anabaptism). His attitude towards Catholics was less ambiguous. He wrote that the massacre of the Catholic bishops was necessary for the establishment of the pure Gospel. To compel the Catholic cantons to accept the new doctrines, he urged civil war and succeeded in persuading Zurich to march against the Catholic territories. Zwingli and other pastors were among the Protestant troops. He was killed at the Battle of Kappel.

And then there was Henry VIII...