

Food for Thought: Not All Popes Resign for the Same Reasons

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In an interview with Professor Stanislao Pugliese we review an illustrious precedent to Pope Ratzinger's resignation—that of Celestine V, who resigned in 1294. Scorned as a “coward” by Dante Alighieri who actually accused him to have paved the way to the appointment of the infamously corrupt Boniface VIII, Celestine was rehabilitated by the renowned Italian writer Ignazio Silone in a



famous novel published in 1968. To offer our readers some food for thought and help put today's events in the Vatican in a broader perspective, Silone's biographer prof. Pugliese tells us the story of Celestine V as reinterpreted by a great Italian writer whose motto was "Conscience is above obedience."

Benedict XVI's resignation on Monday threw the world into a tizzy. Pundits have noted that there are just a handful of precedents in the 2000-year history of the Catholic Church, the most recent being 600 years ago, when Gregory XII resigned in 1415. So, there would seem to be little in those ancient experiences that can help reflect on today's events. Or is there?

I believe there is. For the lay public, in Italy at least, the most famous precedent is Celestine V, who resigned in 1294, just 4 months after being appointed. Most people may know the case of Celestine V, because Dante Alighieri – the world-famous Italian poet and coeval of Celestine – mentioned him derogatorily in his Divine Comedy. Dante, who put Celestine in Hell, accused him of cowardice. Basically, however, Dante hated Celestine because his resignation paved the way for Boniface VIII, whom Dante considered the symbol of corruption of the Church in his times.

But to students of contemporary Italian literature, Celestine is known (and mostly dear) for being the main character of a successful novel by renowned writer Ignazio Silone. In his [L'avventura di un povero cristiano](#) [2] (The Story of a Humble Christian, Harper and Row, 1971. Available on [Amazon.com](#) [3]), published in 1968 and winner of several literary prizes, Silone offered a reinterpretation of Celestine's life, his ascendancy to the papacy and his resignation, which put the whole story in a much more favorable light. Celestine, who lived in the same century as St. Francis of Assisi, the famous friar who preached poverty as the only true Christian lifestyle, would resign in an act of extreme, radical protest against the degeneration of the Church into political intrigues and enormously corrupt behavior.

Though Silone's book makes very pleasant reading to those interested in Italian history and literature, it would also appeal to anyone with an interest in the long history of the relationship between Church, politics and – as we would say today – business.

In order to offer our readers some food for thought on this matter, we have reached out to Stanislaw Pugliese, Professor of modern European history and Distinguished Professor of Italian and Italian American Studies at Hofstra University. Prof. Pugliese is the author of an important biography of Ignazio Silone ([Bitter Spring. A Life of Ignazio Silone](#) [4], 2009), which has won numerous prizes in Italy, England, and the U.S.

Professor Pugliese, would you please summarize for us the plot of Ignazio Silone's The Story of a Humble Christian dedicated to Celestine V and his resignation? And what is the "moral" message of that novel?

A papal conclave in Rome after the death of a Pope is bitterly divided between rival aristocratic families, the Colonna and Orsini, neither of which wishes to see the other ascend to the Papacy. A compromise is reached: the conclave will call on Pietro Da Marrone, a famous monk, in Abruzzo. Pietro, in order to flee crowds who insist he is a holy man and seeking his intercession, has exiled himself to the Maiella, a famous mountain in the Abruzzo. Thinking they can dominate a naïve "cafone" monk, the cardinals arrive at his cave with the news of his election and a magnificent white horse to take the humble monk to Rome. Pietro, trembling before the awesome task before him, decides to take the name Celestino, but rejects the horse saying he prefers to travel to Rome on a donkey, thereby endearing him even more to the peasants. (Even into the twentieth century, peasants in that part of Italy still greeted each other with a Biblical "La pace sia con voi.")

Upon his arrival in Rome, Celestino is shocked by the moral, financial, political and sexual corruption in the Church. So begins his moral crisis, a crisis resolved only when he decides to renounce the Papacy; hence Dante's characterization of him as "colui che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto" (he who made, through cowardice, the great refusal; Inferno, III, 60).

In Silone's imaginative re-telling of the story, one friar remarks "Like Job, Celestine seems the object of a wager between Satan and God." I think the message is that Silone was using an ancient drama



to illuminate what he felt to be the moral failings of the modern Church.

Ignazio Silone was a Communist, an heretical communist I should say. How did his personal biography intermingle with the writing of this book? Considering too that it was published in 1968, a very symbolic year of turmoil in Italy and Europe when the leftist movements of students and workers were in full swing...

Ironically, it was a religious view of the world that had sent Silone into the PCI (Italian Communist Party). But he then grew bitterly convinced that the party had betrayed the workers and peasants of Italy. (As he may have betrayed the PCI in a long exchange of letters with a police official in Rome, as has been alleged.) Hence, the impossibility of Silone remaining in the PCI. He had expelled himself from the Church and was eventually expelled from the PCI in 1931.

In an interview with a French journalist, Silone tellingly described himself as “A Christian without a Church and a Socialist without a Party.” The tragedy of his life was that he could find redemption in neither politics nor orthodox, organized religion. He had been a student of Saint Luigi Orione and drawn to the ethical impulse of Christianity, but the hypocrisy of the Church was unacceptable. Another monk in “The Adventure of a Humble Christian” declares Silone’s motto: “Conscience is above obedience.”

The polemic against the moral as well as the material corruption of the Catholic Church traversed the whole history of Italy and Europe and at one point precipitated the Lutheran reformation and the birth of Protestantism. As a professor of European history, how topical you think this polemic is today?

In the wake of the sexual abuse scandals and continuing revelations of financial corruption, (witness the unfolding Monte dei Paschi di Siena investigation), where is our contemporary Luther? But perhaps it may be dangerous to wish for a modern Luther, who turned out to be more authoritarian than the Papacy. As someone exiled from the Church, I see no need for another stern theologian, but long for another Papa Giovanni or another Albino Luciano (but look what happened to him!)

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