

BENEDICT XIII

BORN 1649. DIED 1730.

PPETER FRANCIS ORSINI, Vincent Mary in the Dominican Order, born on February the 2nd 1649, was the eldest son of Ferdinand X, Duke of Gravina in the kingdom of Naples, and his wife, Giovanna Frangipani, of the ducal family of Tolpha. When still a little child the future Dominican Pope worried his mother to make him a Dominican habit. He used to wear this at his games, which were mostly of an ecclesiastical character, and we are also told that he fashioned for himself vestments and a little mitre. His parents, then, could scarcely have been surprised when, at the age of sixteen, he asked to be allowed to enter the Order of Preachers, but they were bitterly disappointed, because, in addition to being heir to the Duchy of Gravina, he was heir to his childless uncle, the Duke of Bracciano, who was the head of the great Orsini family. The Neapolitan friars very firmly refused to accept the boy, but Peter Francis was determined not to be defrauded of his vocation and took the opportunity of a family visit to Venice to run off to the friars there. Father Vincent Mary Gentili, a very well known Dominican who afterwards became Archbishop of Genoa, received the boy into the Order, gave him his own name in religion, and entrusted him to the care of Father Dominic Burke, who was then Novice-Master at Venice. This Irish friar was well fitted for the charge of such a generous soul, for he himself had suffered much for his vocation and had escaped from prison in Kinsale at the peril of his life. He had worked for six years in Spain and then came to Italy, where he acted as novice-master in several important

convents. In 1671 he was appointed Bishop of Elphin, and after much further persecution he died an exile at Louvain in 1704. His influence over the young Orsini was very great, and the latter throughout his long life always showed a particular love and veneration for the Irish Dominicans.

Meanwhile his parents and his uncle complained to the Pope, Clement IX, of the action of the Venetian Dominicans, but the Pope, having himself examined the young novice, not only approved his vocation, but to shelter him from further family annoyance allowed him to be professed when he had worn the habit only six months. It is pleasant to find that his mother not only repented of her opposition but, on the death of Duke Ferdinand, became a nun in a convent of the Third Order of Saint Dominic, as also did her daughter. If Brother Vincent had dreams of a long and sheltered life in the cloister he was soon disillusioned, for on February 22nd, 1672, when only twenty-three years of age, he was proclaimed Cardinal Priest of St. Sixtus by his relative, Pope Clement X, who had already, on August 24th of the previous year, created him Cardinal, but reserved his name *in petto*. Dismayed at such a promotion, the young priest—he had only been ordained one year—strove hard to escape the unwelcome dignity, but the Pope directed the Master-General to command him to accept in virtue of his vow of obedience. Three years later he was required to accept either the Archbishopric of Salerno or that of Manfredonia (Siponte); characteristically, he chose the latter because it was the poorer. In 1680 he was transferred to Cesena and six years later to the important see of Benevento, which he held till his death in 1730, ruling it whilst he was Pope through a Vicar-General, Cardinal Coscia. It is not an exaggeration to say that no more saintly and hard-working bishop had ruled in Italy since the death of Saint

Blackfriars

Charles Borromeo. Each year Cardinal Orsini made an episcopal visitation of each parish, built new and restored old churches, erected hospitals and in every way sought to relieve distress and suffering. Twice he held a Synod of his whole Province, the first, in 1693, being attended by eighteen suffragan bishops, the second, in 1698, by twenty, and the Acts were approved and commended by the Holy See. Twice during his episcopate, 1688 and 1702, Benevento was severely damaged by earthquakes, but the Archbishop did so much to relieve the sufferers and spent so much money in rebuilding the city that he was called its second founder. He himself narrowly escaped death during the first earthquake, when he fell from an upper room into the basement. The gentleman with whom he was talking at the time was killed, but he himself was saved by some beams forming an archway over him, and he was dug out an hour and a half later totally uninjured. He attributed his escape to his favourite patron, Saint Philip Neri, whose image he was wearing at the time.

On May 29th, 1724, after a conclave lasting seventy days, Cardinal Orsini was elected Pope in succession to Innocent XII. This was the sixth conclave at which he had assisted, and when we consider that the other five had lasted an average length of two months it seems clear that little unanimity was to be found in the Sacred College during the latter half of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries. These continual delays were largely the result of the political state of Europe. Apart from the non-Italian Cardinals, who frequently followed the dictates of their various Governments, there existed two marked divisions in the Sacred College, the *Zelanti* and the *Moderate Party*. The former bound themselves always to vote for the best candidate irrespective of the favour or disfavour shown him by the various courts, whereas

the Moderate party were willing to exclude the best candidate if he were not a *persona grata* with some European power, provided they could find a not incapable substitute. Cardinal Orsini, as we should expect, had been a staunch member of the *Zelanti* in all his many conclaves and, but for his uncompromising spirit, he would almost certainly have been elected Pope years before. As his sixth conclave lengthened out from March 20th to May 25th he began a novena of prayers to his beloved Saint Philip, only to find, on the fourth day of his novena, that all eyes were directed towards himself and that his election was certain.

The voting that day, May 29th, was, he saw, sure to go in his favour, and though he protested his great age, his many infirmities, his incapacity and want of energy, the Cardinals determined to proceed to the voting which resulted in the requisite majority. But he still held out, even under the theological fire of the celebrated Jesuit theologian, Cardinal Tolomei, who sought to prove to him theologically that he was bound to take up the burden; he only agreed when the Cardinals sent for the Master General of his Order, Father Augustine Pipia, who commanded him under obedience to accept the tiara. Orsini, who throughout his long life always acknowledged the General's authority, submitted and allowed himself to be proclaimed under the title of Benedict XIV, but later changed the numeral of the title to XIII when it was pointed out to him that Peter de Luna, the Benedict XIII of the Great Schism, had been an anti-pope.

Although he was seventy-five years of age he determined to make no change in his ascetic life, and his first objection was to the luxurious bed prepared for him in the Vatican. He insisted on sending for a Dominican bed with a hard mattress and coarse woollen sheets. On the day of his coronation he was

carried, as usual, to St. Peter's in the *sedia gestatoria*, but on reaching the doors of the basilica he ordered the bearers to stop, and descending he walked up the vast aisle, to the consternation of the Master of Ceremonies whose objections he brushed aside by saying that he was not worthy to sweep out the sacred edifice, much less be carried through it on a throne, and persisted in his action although the Master of Ceremonies rather bitterly asked what was the use of the choir singing *Ecce Sacerdos Magnus* if the people in the great church could not see his Holiness.

Benedict, as has been said, retained his old diocese of Benevento, though the administrator, Cardinal Coscia, grossly abused the Pope's confidence, for which Benedict's successor, Clement XII. imprisoned him for ten years. Coscia's peculations, both at Benevento and Rome, though they were unknown to the Pope, were well known to others and cast the only shadow over a glorious pontificate. Benedict visited Benevento as Pope in 1727 and again in 1729. On the first occasion, Algerine pirates lay in wait for the papal ship, for they had conceived the audacious design of carrying the Pope a prisoner to Algiers. Whilst imagination recoils from contemplating their possible success, Benedict himself was not much perturbed, though on his second visit he sailed in one of his own war galleys and the Algerines preferred discretion to valour.

The Pope's love for his old diocese was equalled by his love for his Order and one of his first visits as Pope was to the convent of the Minerva, where the Master General resided. He attended the office in choir and dined with the community in the refectory, where he sat at the same table as the General. He would not allow the latter to kiss his foot, but gave him his hand instead and then insisted on kissing the hand of the General to show that he still regarded him as his reli-

gious superior. His admiration for the General was indeed great, but Father Pipia must have considered the Pope avenged when Benedict placed him under obedience to accept the office of Cardinal as he himself had been forced by Pipia to accept the Pontificate. It also spoke largely for the Pope's fine character that he showed every mark of respect to Pipia's successor, Father Ripoll, who had been elected in opposition to Father Molo, whose claims the Pope himself had advocated. Benedict also showed his love for the Irish Dominicans by frequent visits to them at St. Sixtus. On one occasion he went there to make a ten days' retreat before Easter and he lived with the community as one of themselves, attending the choir and refectory with them and on Monday and Tuesday in Holy Week he received, in company with the friars, the customary discipline at the hands of the hebdomadary, Father Michael McDonough. He had a great admiration for the future bishop and historian, Father Thomas Burke, with whom he often conversed. He also showed his Order's traditional love for the Franciscans, with whom he sometimes dined at Ara Cæli, wearing the Dominican habit.

Throughout his long pastoral life he had been noted for his tender care of the poor and suffering, and now that he was Pope it was no uncommon sight in Rome to see him alight from his carriage to visit and console some sick person, and often he himself administered the last sacraments.

Perhaps after his charity he was most remarkable for his zeal in matters of ecclesiastical rites and discipline. He who had been a bishop so long was well qualified to publish a new *Ceremoniale Episcoporum* which still remains in force. He also wished to restore as far as possible the dignity of ecclesiastical chant and showed little tolerance for the abuses then rife. For example, he rebuked the Benedictine nuns of

Milan for using various musical instruments during the celebration of High Mass and Vespers; and he also forbade the Franciscans to use any other instrument than the organ in their churches. Lest we should deem him to have been intolerant in this matter we should remember that one of his successors, the celebrated Benedict XIV, had to forbid the use of violins, oboes, mandolins, kettledrums and other varieties of instrument in the sacred liturgy. Benedict XIII also embodied much useful legislation in the decrees of the Lateran Synod which he held in 1725. This Council ordered the acceptance of the Bull *Unigenitus* and the Pope had the satisfaction of receiving the submission of Cardinal de Noailles, Archbishop of Paris, who had hitherto refused to accept it, and under a former Pope had appealed from the Pope to a General Council.

Benedict had difficulties with several governments. He successfully adjusted affairs with Naples and Savoy, but with Portugal he was less successful. John V became enraged when the Pope would not confer the Red Hat on the unworthy Monsignor Bichi and severed all communication with the Holy See. Benedict always regarded promotions to the Sacred College as amongst his chief cares and only chose men of excellent character and ability. The two most prominent were Vincent Gotti, one of the greatest theologians the Dominican Order has produced, and Prospero Lambertini, famous as Pope Benedict XIV.

Benedict XIII was seized with his last illness, an attack of influenza, in February, 1730. For a few days hopes were held out of his recovery, but his strength suddenly collapsed and he died on February 21st. He had been a Dominican sixty-five years, a Cardinal sixty, and a bishop fifty-five.

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