

## Paul IV and government of Rome: Reassessing the impact of Great Men in the religion and politics of the Counter-Reformation

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The historiography of Counter-Reformation Italy has for a long time held a strange relationship with positivism, the narrative of great men and paradigms of modernity. Perhaps inevitably, in a country with such strong regional traditions, it is characterized by a patchwork of local studies and a focus on local figures and responses to the great reforming Council of Trent. The principal characters of this story are Carlo Ginzburg's Friulian miller, Paolo Prodi's diocesan bishops, Massimo Firpo's heretics. Papal Rome, by contrast, is acknowledged only with suspicion, the popes cast as villains, whose repressive impulse to centralize and to crush local initiatives was responsible for the failure of Italy to coalesce as a united polity until Garibaldi and the patriots of the Risorgimento forced a final separation of Church and State. This decidedly Whiggish interpretation has had two damaging effects. The first is a tendency to view papal activity in terms of *realpolitik* and to detach a politicized papacy entirely from the spiritual and pastoral developments of the sixteenth century. The second is that in setting Rome up as a powerful and negative independent force it made it hard to assess the symbiosis between centre and periphery, the involvement of local elites in the running of papal government, and, ultimately, the dialectic process by which individual actors shaped the development of that government and its institutions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For extended discussions of the place of the Counter-Reformation in Italian historiography see Adriano Prosperi, "Riforma cattolica, crisi religiosa, disciplinamento: un percorso di ricerca", *Annali dell'istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento*, XIX (1993), 401-15, and Simon Ditchfield, "In search of local knowledge: Rewriting early modern Italian religious history", *Cristianesimo nella storia*, 19 (1998), 255-296. See also Herbert Butterfield's classic description, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, London, 1931.

My aim in this paper is to step back from this historiographical impasse by trying to suggest how we might construct a more balanced view of the relationships between centre and periphery and the influences on each other of powerful individuals and the communities from which they were drawn. My case study is Paul IV, probably the most uncompromising man ever to ascend St Peter's Throne, but thus also an intriguing example for assessing the ability of an individual, however contrary to make a difference. Pious, self-righteous, zealous, bigoted, Paul proved to be one of the most enduringly divisive figures of the sixteenth century. Although long regarded as one of the most saintly members of the Sacred College, Paul's inflexible views were deemed by many to rule him out from being chosen by his colleagues to be their Head. It thus proved a great shock when in 1555 the cardinals, faced with a second conclave in just a month, sought to buy a little time before they were again bound to undergo the inevitable conflicts and negotiations of the electoral process by selecting the oldest amongst them as a short-lived solution, in spite of the almost universal concerns about his character.<sup>2</sup> Thus they made Paul pope, giving him absolute power over the Papal States and the Church in Italy, even though his own views on almost every aspect of the Church appeared to conflict with the prevailing norms amongst his subjects. The question is what impact did absolute power give to Paul? I want to consider Paul's personal impact in two ways: first, his ability to use the absolute power of the papal monarchy to affect change over the behaviour of Italian bishops, one of the most important subjects of the Counter-Reformation; secondly,

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<sup>2</sup> For greater detail see A.Santosuosso, "An Account of the Election of Paul IV to the Pontificate", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 31 (1978), 486-98. There is no adequate modern study of Paul's reign. Alberto Aubert's is the only recent example, *Paolo IV: Politica, inquisizione e storiografia*, Florence, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1999.

the importance of his own regional identity in determining the way in which he used the power of government in Rome.

Bishops have always been placed at the centre of discussions about the Counter-Reformation. Not only were the great reforming diocesans like Gabriele Paleotti or Carlo Borromeo at the centre of the implementation of the new Tridentine decrees, but the most hotly-contested of those decrees themselves concerned episcopal obligations and the rules of engagement with the office. At the Council of Trent (1545-63) the very real differences in viewpoint over the role of bishops between the Italian and transalpine delegations became very apparent. German and Spanish delegates emphasized the importance of the resident bishop able to take a pastoral and administrative lead in the control of his local diocese. For Italians, on the other hand, the place of the bishop was increasingly as a representative of a locality (or localities) in Rome where the Church had slowly been adapted to provide a parallel and stabilizing political hierarchy to complement the overlapping and fragmented local communities in the peninsula.<sup>3</sup> Though events since Luther had precipitated talk of reform, such was the importance of episcopal revenues to support clerics at the court in Rome, that what came to pass had been little more than cosmetic. In 1547, Paul III had been embarrassed into banning the holding of multiple bishoprics but left open a range of techniques by which several could still be manipulated and controlled at once by a single family or prelate.

Needless to say, Paul did not share the understanding held by many of his fellow Italians and he took a rigorous and austere interpretation of canon law. Within a year of his election he closed these loopholes and effectively ended the use of bishoprics as a

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<sup>3</sup> Antony Wright offers a good summary of these problems, *The Early Modern Papacy from the Council of Trent to the French Revolution, 1564-1789*, London, 2000, 102-145.

source of patronage and funding for Italian elites. Yet in spite of certain signs of dissent the evidence suggests that the cardinals felt obliged to follow Paul's edicts. The net result of this was a sudden need to find new means to achieve the ends to which the trafficking of bishoprics had previously been put. What ensued was a shift in concentration from the trade in bishoprics to one in more minor ecclesiastical offices and the rise of pensions, which could be siphoned off from the revenues of an office and paid to another party. This shift in the patterns of funding prelates in Rome, though it was forced on reluctant Italian clerics by their decision to elect Paul and thus give him absolute authority to determine such matters of positive law, actually made the resolution of what proved to be one of the crucial deadlocks at the Council of Trent, the role of bishops, much easier. By the time the Council reconvened in 1562 after a ten year hiatus, the conflict between the understanding of the episcopal role by Italians and the other delegates had been neutralized because Paul had ensured a change in Italian practices.<sup>4</sup>

The second area in which I would like to observe this Paul's personal impact was in the importance of his Neapolitan identity and preoccupations. Amongst the most obvious effects of this was a spike in the number of promotions to the cardinalate from central and southern Italy, although most popes tended to appoint a higher than average proportion of cardinals from their own native territory. However, where his southern background most clearly manifested itself was in his subversion of papal policy to attempt the expulsion of the Spanish from Naples where they had been consolidating control since the early years of the century. For three years central policy in Rome was determined by Paul's provincial concerns, even though these worked against the interests

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<sup>4</sup> For greater detail see Barbara McClung Hallman, *Italian Cardinals, Reform, and the Church as Property*, Berkeley, 1985, in particular 21-38.

of those from other localities (and even some in Naples). Of course, in the long run, Paul's policies fell through. The papal armies suffered a series of humiliating defeats against the Spanish that confirmed once and for all the Hapsburg hegemony over the peninsula. Further, the crisis that Paul's policies brought about precipitated for the first time the formulation of rules and norms about the relationship between private familial interests and the public papal office. The result was the trial and execution of Paul's cardinal nephew for his part in the affair.<sup>5</sup>

These two examples from Paul's reign serve to caution against the simplistic binary ideologies between centre and periphery, religion and politics, or even individuals and confessional communities that have dominated the historiography of the Counter-Reformation. Paul's actions at once shows how the papal office could be hijacked by regional concerns but also how limited central directives could be in effecting changes to local power structures. Paul's individual and locally-developed preoccupations informed the decisions he made at the centre of papal government, which in turn filtered through to the localities of the Church in Italy. For reasons of space, I have not touched in detail on the relationship between religion and politics, but it seems fairly clear that the crude dichotomy between papal *realpolitik* and 'confessionalized' localities is not sustainable in the case of Paul's pontificate. The deepest irony, perhaps, is that Paul's impact as a great man of the Counter-Reformation was primarily in securing change by uniting opposition, compelling Italian elites to new understandings about the way in which religious structures represented and reflected their society, but though he was thus able to alter the parameters of discussion he did little to change the direction of its conclusion.

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<sup>5</sup> Archivio di Stato di Roma, Tribunale Criminale del Governatore, *Processi*, 53-59 (1560); Archivio Segreto Vaticano, *Miscellanea Armarium* XI.112-114; *Fondo Borghese* I.130. This trial is the main focus of my doctoral research.