

NOVEMBER 11, 1968JOHN A. KIELY

It was in a little town in the Blue Grass, where I spent my summers at my grandparents' home, that I heard of Pope Joan. Every other summer or so, there was a mission held at the little Catholic church. Usually children did not attend, but one evening Aunt Mary took me with her. The most interesting thing to me was the question box, into which questions might be dropped and the padre would read them aloud and answer them. Some of the questions I heard that evening I could have answered by rote from my little catechism, which we learned by heart those days, getting the meaning of the larger words as we grew older. One of the questions was new and startling. It read: "Was there not a woman Pope during the middle ages?" The young priest answered no. He did not say that the story was an invention of the Reformers, but he indicated they had spread the story with a will. He concluded by saying that even Gibbon, who was not all inclined to catholicity, ridiculed the legend.

I sensed the story was something my elders did not like and was immensely curious about it. Aunt Mary could give me no further information.. My uncle, whom the family thought to be something of a scholar, merely said it was a myth. I could find nothing in my grandfather's books about it. As the summer went on I lost interest and forgot about it.

Many years later the name cropped up again, revived my old interest, and I did what reading on the subject I could. The story had its origin in the old manuscript chronicles which were not available to me, but enough of it was quoted verbatim from the chronicles in the books I had access to. I learned that while the Reformers did take pleasure in baiting Rome with the story, they certainly did not invent it, although they did add impressive touches as time went on. Actually, along with other medieval myths such as Prester John, The Wandering Jew and the Piper of Hamelin, the legend of the woman Pope was current in the thirteenth century and generally believed. In the Chronicle of Metz, which was written about the middle of the

thirteenth century, it is put in the following words:

"Query? With regard to a certain Pope or Popess, because she was a woman who pretended to be a man. On account of his ability, he became in turn notary of the Curia, Cardinal, and Pope. One day while he was riding, he gave birth to a child. According to Roman Law, his feet were tied together, and he was dragged at a horse's tail for half a league, while the people stoned him. He was buried on the spot where he died, and this inscription set up:

'Petre, Pater Patrum, Papisse Prodito Parturn.'

During his pontificate, the fast of the Ember Days, called the Popess' fast was instituted."

Stephen de Bourbon in *De Diversis Materiis*, who wrote about the year 1261, adds a bit, saying that Joan was not a Roman and that she became Cardinal and Pope by the devil's assistance. He dates the event 1100 A.D.

John Huss, the Bohemian reformer, it is interesting to note, gave full credence to the story. He called the Popess Agnes. It is said that when brought to trial for heresy, he was asked whether he had written "Jesus Christ could govern His Church on earth, without a visible chief, by his true disciples, scattered throughout the universe." He answered that he had so written and added "Was not the Church without a head and without a ruler during the two years and five months Joan occupied the See of Rome?"

When the Reformation divided Christianity into two camps, neither of which balked at sterner measures where libel and slander failed to serve, some of the commentators embellished the story with clever little touches of their own; all galling to the Roman See. Some made the father of the infant

a Cardinal, some a servant, and others the devil himself. Baring-Gould, who had access to some of the earlier accounts in the British Museum says that some of the accounts were illustrated with wood engravings, showing the procession of bishops and taper bearers proceeding solemnly, and the cross-bearer before the triple crowned and vested Pontiff stepping aside to witness the unexpected arrival.

One of the chroniclers, on the Catholic side, in "Urbis Romae Mirabilia," probably feeling it an impropriety that anyone who had occupied the Throne of Peter should wind up in hell, added another interesting detail: An angel from heaven appeared to Joan just before the unblessed event and gave her the choice of burning forever in hell or having her delivery in public. With good sense she chose the latter course, which can signify either that at heart she was a good catholic, or was a canny gambler who recognized the usual percentage in favor of the house.

Except for a diversity in endings, the final version of the story is that Joan was born at Engelheim of English parents. She was boyish in appearance and had an abiding love of learning. She fell in love with a young Benedictine monk who returned her affection in equal measure. Dressing herself in male clothing, Joan abandoned her home and family and, through her lover's intercession, she was admitted to the monastery at Fulda. There she devoted her days to study and her nights, as frequently as possible, to her lover. Having exhausted the library at Fulda, she persuaded her young monk leave the monastery with her and to to Athens. They made their way there, and there he died, exhausted it is said, by the journey.

The chroniclers assumed that the ancient academies still flourished at Athens, for they say that Joan studied and taught there, her genius quickly giving her all that the ancients had to offer. From Athens she went to Rome, opened a school, and made such a reputation for learning and sanctity that she became a notary of the Curia, and when Leo IV died she was unanimously chosen

Pope. She served two years and five months under the name of John VIII. When the season arrived for the Rogation processions, she miscalculated her time. Her condition concealed by the ample vestments, she passed the street between the Amphitheatre and St. Clement's and then, seized with pain, fell to the ground among the crowd. There in the street she was delivered of a son.

In the finale there is diversity. One version is that the mother and child died then and there. Another is that she was killed by the outraged mob. Another, with a bit more imagination, says that she survived but was incarcerated, and the child was spirited away by the devil to be the Antichrist of the last days of the world. A kinder ending is that she was helped away by friends in the papal retinue, retired to a convent and her son was educated by her friends, entered the church and finally became a bishop.

At the corner where the event was said to have occurred, there stood a marble monument representing a woman with a baby in her arms. It was believed, during the currency of the legend, to be a statue of Joan and her baby; and it was said to be significant that the papal processions turned aside to avoid the street of the great scandal. Martin Luther saw the statue when he visited Rome in 1511.

Historians who have studied the chronicles in which the tale appears, with a few exceptions, believe that the Chronicle of Martin Polonus of Troppau, who wrote about the year 1257 is the origin of the written story, and his chronicle is the source of the several interpolations in the somewhat earlier chronicles. Martin wrote Chronicles of Popes and Emperors at the request of Clement IV. He says Pope Joan succeeded Leo IV. His account runs:

"After Leo IV, John Anglus, a native of Metz, reigned for two years, five months, and four days. And the pontificate was vacant for a month. He died in Rome. He is related to have been a

female , and when a girl, to have accompanied her sweetheart in male costume to Athens; there she advanced in various sciences, and none could be found to equal her. So, after having studied for three years in Rome, she had great masters for her pupils and hearers. And when there arose a high opinion in the city of her virtue and knowledge, she was unanimously elected Pope. During her papacy she became in the family way. Not knowing the time of birth, as she was on her way from St. Peter's to the Lateran she had a painful delivery, between the Coliseum and St. Clement's Church, in the street. Having died after, it is said she was buried on the spot, and therefore the Lord Pope always turns aside from that way, and it is supposed by some, out of detestation for what happened there. Nor on that account is she placed in the catalogue of the Holy Pontiffs, not only on account of her sex, but also because of the horribleness of the circumstances."

In commenting on the legend, Conway in his *Studies in Church History* says:

"It is certain that, as late as the fifteenth century, there was a statue of a pagan goddess with a child in a narrow Roman street near St. Clement's Church on the way to the Lateran. This statue was removed to the Quirinal by Sixtus V, probably on account of the legends which centered about it. This statue bore an inscription consisting of five letters, P.P.P.P.P. Lelievre, in the *Revue des Questions Historiques* interprets it as follows: *Pater Patrum Propria Pecunia Posuit*. (A Priest of Mithra erected this statue at his own expense.)

"The populace, having a vague notion of a female Pope, deduced either from the woman Patriarch of Constantinople or the dominance of Marozia

in the Rome of the tenth century, were not satisfied with this simple explanation, but interpreted these letters in the way we find recorded in the Chronicle of Metz, viz: Petre, Pater Patrum, Papisse Pro-dito Partum. (Peter, father or fathers, you shall make public the childbirth of the Papess.)

"When the Popes went in solemn procession from St. Peter's to the Lateran, they avoided passing along the street which leads from the Coliseum to St. Clement's. Some concluded they did so out of shame, because the statue of Pope Joan stood there, whereas the real reason was the extreme narrowness of the street."

As I have recounted, the champions of the myth were some of the Reformers of the sixteenth century. Which can be well understood, for both sides of the religious controversy threw mud as well as more formidable weapons at each other. A war of documents and alleged authorities was waged on the subject. Finally the entire story was proved, and by scholars who had no love for the papacy, to be destitute of truth. Among them were Blondell, Bayle, Sarran, and Gibbon. They point out that there is not sufficient time gap in the reliable historical records to allow for even a temporary reign. The date usually given in the legend is 855, between Popes Leo IV and Benedict III. It is beyond doubt, these historians say, that Leo died July 17, 855. An antipope whose name was Anastasius was elected upon Leo IV's death at the insistence of Emperor Louis. He took possession of the papal palace and incarcerated Benedict. Almost immediately his supporters abandoned him and Benedict assumed the pontificate. He took possession of his see and was consecrated in the presence of legates of the Emperor on September 29, 855. Silver coins minted during that period corroborate the records that Benedict was Pope until April 858 and Nicholas I was consecrated on April 24, 858. Anastasius cannot be the supposed Joan. He was unquestionably a man and his life and conduct make that assumption untenable .

But the legend was generally believed. For almost three centuries, from the middle of the

thirteenth century until the middle of the sixteenth century, few questioned the legend of Pope Joan. The general opinion of Christendom held for Joan. One of the first of the scholars to deny it was John Thurmayer in his *Annales Biorum*, dated 1544. He was no fervent catholic. Bayle calls him a good Lutheran in disguise, and his book was put on the Index in 1564. Prior to Thurmayer's writings the story was so commonly accepted that in the year 1400, on completion of the magnificent Cathedral of Sienna, when the portraits of the Popes were placed in the Cathedral, a portrait of Pope Joan was unhesitatingly placed among them. For two hundred years it stood there among the undisputed Popes, bearing the inscription "Johannes VIII, a Woman from England". It was finally removed at the instance of Clement VIII, who reigned from 1592 to 1605.

The most recent defender of the myth was Maurice Lachatre. In 1845 he wrote a work which he entitled:

History of the Popes: Crimes, Murders,
Poisonings, Parricides, Adulteries,
Incests from St. Peter to Gregory XVI.

He lauds Florimond de Raymond, one of the earlier defenders of Pope Joan, saying:

"Florimond de Raymond compares Joan to a second Hercules, sent from Heaven to drush the Roman Church whose abominations had excited the fury of God. "

There has been much speculation as to the origin of the story. The theory of Leo Allatius is of interest. He was a Greek scholar and theologian. After passing some years at Calabria, he finally settled at Rome and taught Greek. In 1622, during the Thirty Years' War, Tilly captured Heidelberg. Maximilian, the elector of Bavaria, confiscated its splendid library of 196 cases of manuscripts and presented them to Pope Gregory XV. Allatius superintended its removal from Heidelberg to Rome where it was incorporated into the Vatican

Library. Allatius became librarian to Berberini and then librarian to the Vatican. Although a Greek by birth, he became an ardent Roman Catholic. He was a voluminous translator and writer and was the author of many commentaries on the ancient authors, the institutions of the Greek and Roman churches and of historical works. He believed the Roman people made a Pope out of the pseudo-prophetess, Thiota, who was condemned by the Synod of Mainz in 847.

Bellarmino mentions the letter of Pope Leo IV to Michael Cerularius, Patriarch of Constantinople, protesting the consecration of eunuchs to the episcopate and alluding to the rumor that a woman had once been Patriarch. He believes this letter may have given rise to the story. Ruben Parsons in his Studies of History refers to the Greek schism as one of the proofs of the falsity of the story. He writes:

"Photius, the father of the Greek Schism, a most bitter enemy of the Roman See, and yet a most learned man, would not have omitted to make capital out of the career of the Popess Joan, winding up, as it is asserted to have done, with so extraordinary a termination, had he known of it. Such an event could not have escaped his knowledge, for at the time it is said to have happened, Photius was secretary of state to the emperor Michael III. Now this learned schismatic, in a book written by him when his bitterness against Rome was fully developed, distinctly enumerates the successors of Leo IV, down to that day, Benedict, Nicholas, John and Adrian, without a hint of so acceptable an interregnum as that of Joan would have been to his heart."

Conway in his Studies in Church History says that Theodora and her daughters, Marozia and Theodora, so dominated the Popes John X, John XI, John XII, and John XIII, who in all reigned from

929 to 972, that the saying was "We have women for Popes." He quotes from a chronicle of Benedict of St. Andrew that says under John XI Rome fell into the power of the woman Marozia and was governed by her. In this statement, Conway is in accord with Gibbon who writes in the Decline and Fall,

"The influence of two sister prostitutes, Marozia and Theodora, v/as founded on their wealth and beauty, their political and amorous intrigues: the most strenuous of their lovers were rewarded with the Roman mitre, and their reign may have suggested to the darker ages the fable of a female pope."

Gibbon, who scoffs at the story of the female pope, had no love for the papacy or respect for the clergy, remarking in the same work that

". . .to a philosophic eye, the vices of the clergy are far less dangerous than their virtues."

Ferdinand Gregorovius in his History of Rome in the Middle Ages says the fable, which was the child of ignorance and a passion for romance, perhaps owes its origin in part to the hatred of the Romans toward the temporal rule of the Popes, which, he points out, is clearly shown in the Mirabilia. In that work marvels were narrated of the sounding statues on the Capitol, of the building of the Pantheon at the direction of Cybele, the mother of the gods, and many other marvels.

John Farrow, in his Pageant of the Popes, a Frank History of the Papacy, points out that with the death of Charles the Fat in the late ninth century, three princes claimed the title of Emperor: Arnulf, king of the Germans; Berlingar, the ruler of Italy; and Guido, duke of Spoleto. The first two were of the line of Charlemagne. Guido was not of such descent. He was a Lombard and regarded the temporal sovereignty of the Pope with jealousy. Guido defeated Berlingar in battle and, there being no other opposition in Italy, he

marched on Rome and without convoking counsel, he commanded Stephen, as his vassal, to proclaim him emperor. Shortly thereafter Stephen died and Formosus, Bishop of Porto, a long time intriguer in Italian politics, succeeded Stephen. He manifested an eager submission to Guido while at his secret urging the German began a march toward Rome. Before he arrived, Guido died, leaving in power his son Lambert. Formosus with deep duplicity crowned the young duke with all of the ceremonial paraphernalia. As Arnulf, the German king neared Rome, Lambert was forced to withdraw to Spoloto, his dukedom. On his arrival at Rome, the German king was proclaimed emperor by Formosus. Arnulf then turned his attention to Spoloto, but before he could conclude his triumphant series of battles with the extermination of Lambert, he suggested a stroke. His army abandoned the campaign, and, carrying their stricken monarch on a litter, they returned across the Alps. Rome was left to the mercy of Lambert.

Fortunately for himself, Formosus died before Lambert reached Rome. There Lambert succeeded in having his candidate Stephen VII installed. Then he disinterred the decaying body of Formosus, wrapped it in pontifical robes, propped it on a throne, and a frightened assembly of the clergy went through the motions of a trial. The pontificate of Formosus was declared to have been invalid, his acts illegal, and his decaying body was mutilated and thrown into the Tiber.

Farrow says the papal office was totally in the power of the reigning political faction:

"Murder was no longer unfamiliar to the papal station, and the vile acts of the time marked the symbolical commencement of an era which was to persist for a century and a half and which was to shroud the papacy with gloom and shame. The Chair of Peter became the prize of tyrants and brigands and a throne fouled by fierce tides of crime and licentiousness.

"In 903 Sergius III was elected. Although he carried the titular glory of the august office he was never to be the real ruler of Rome. That power was vested in Theodora, a woman with no morals but many ambitions. She was the wife of Theophylact who from the spoils of public office had accumulated the greatest wealth possessed by any individual in the Papal States. The fruits of an evil union were two daughters, Theodora the Younger and Marozia, who, according to some writers of the period, strengthened the bonds between her mother and the Pope by acting as his mistress."

Sergius died in 911, succeeded by Anastasius III and the latter by Lando. By the time of Lando's death, the papal election was completely controlled by the House of Theophylact, husband of Theodora. John X, said to be her paramour, was then installed. On the death of Theodora and her husband, who was complacent in all things that led to power, their daughter Marozia became the power in Rome. John X, who before the deaths of Theodora and her husband, had become to some extent independent, now became her victim. Marozia was beautiful, rich and popular, and the leader of a powerful and organized party in Rome. At her instigation there was rebellion in the Lateran, and Petrus, brother of Pope John and prefect of Rome, was executed in front of the Pope who was imprisoned and then suffocated.

Coming back to the source of the legend, Baring-Gould, the learned English parson and student of medieval history, thinks that Pope Joan is an impersonification of the great whore of Revelation of whom St. John writes in Chapter 17:

"And there came one of the seven angels. . saying to me, Come hither; I will show unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters.

"With whom the kings of the earth have

committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication.

"So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet colored beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.

"And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication:

"And upon her forehead was a name written, "Mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth. . . .

"The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sitteth. . . ."

Baring-Gould says the scandal of the Antipopes, the utter worldliness and pride of others, the spiritual fornication with the kings of the earth along with the advent of an adulterous woman, Marozia, who did rule over an imperial city, seated on seven hills, gave rise to the legend.

There is no question but that from the earliest ages of the Church, the advent of the Antichrist had been expected at some time or other, and the scandalous condition of the Roman See, described by Farrow and others, crystalized this curious myth.

To me it is still as fascinating a story as it was fifty odd years ago to a small town boy wondering where he could learn something further about Popess Joan.

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