

THE CHURCH IN ITALY
IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

The Birkbeck Lectures, 1971

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I

THE PROBLEMS OF ITALIAN CHURCH HISTORY

The difficulties facing the historian of the church in Italy are very considerable and deserve preliminary consideration. This must begin by emphasising a paradox. In recent times church history in Italy has often been written at a very low level indeed. Yet Italy had centuries before been a pioneer in such studies.

There is no need to go behind Bartolomeo Sacchi, called from his birth-place Platina, whose *History of the Popes* is a somewhat neglected work.¹ For the early period of papal history he preserved the legends which were often abstracted in the form he had given them by other writers at the time and for centuries to come. In common with his fellow curialist and contemporary Biondo in the *Decades*,² as Platina drew nearer to his own day (he died in 1481) so his work became increasingly a history not, it is true, of the Italian church as such, but of papal policy in Italy. In many ways Platina resembled the many historians working in the princely courts of *quattrocento* Italy. He was indeed to commemorate his patrons the Gonzaga with a history of Mantua.³ But he had an inestimable advantage, to be shared by later historians of the papacy. In his *Lives of the Popes* he was not writing the history of a dynasty. He was writing the history of an institution of which he was a rather quarrelsome member.⁴ This, together with his sharp criticism of some popes and the high level of his accuracy, ensured respect for him among other writers, including Protestants in the post-Reformation period. In the mid-sixteenth century he was edited and continued by Panvinio.⁵ In 1601 appeared the first edition of the *Lives of the Popes and Cardinals* by the Spaniard Ciacconius (Chacon).⁶ From Platina to Ciacconius papal historiography had progressed solidly, surviving the acerbities of the Reformation, and becoming more scientific and less polemical. As already mentioned, it was Platina's criticism of 'bad' popes which enabled him in some sense to be regarded as a 'reformer' of sorts in the eyes of the sixteenth-century

Protestant reader, so that his influence was exerted in both religious camps.

In the 1620s a number of Italian scholars began to collect material for the revision of Ciacconius. This was officially sponsored, the new edition appearing from the Vatican press in 1630. Some of the papers of this enterprise have fortunately survived and from these we can infer the large part played by the Irish Observant Franciscan, Luke Wadding, and a young Cistercian born in Florence in 1595, Ferdinando Ughelli. Ughelli rose in his order and became abbot of the Tre Fontane, south of Rome, which is now a Trappist house. Ughelli belongs to that group of prodigious scholars who illuminated the seventeenth century with their erudition and their application. He in fact did more than any other scholar to found a truly based church history of Italy by compiling a work which is still indispensable. The *Italia sacra* appeared in nine volumes at Rome between 1643 and 1662, and these folios are the foundation stone on which all subsequent histories of the Italian church are based. It is ironical that they were produced at a time when there was as yet no Italy. How much did they contribute to the emergence of that concept? There was a *nazione italica* in only the most limited or geographical sense.⁷ Ughelli's *Italia sacra* helped to give life to the idea.⁸

And how much did his work contribute to the practice of sophisticated church history in other parts of what used to be Christendom? The publication of *Italia sacra* began in 1643 and so was coeval with the Saint-Marthes' *Gallia christiana* (Paris 1656), and Henry Wharton's somewhat differently conceived *Anglia sacra* (1691) although it is later than Padilla's ecclesiastical history of Spain (1605) and may have owed a good deal to early seventeenth-century French antiquarians; it is at any rate interesting to note that Ughelli intended originally to publish his work at Lyon.⁹ The connection between Ughelli and his Italian and French predecessors deserves investigation. What is not in doubt is the influence exerted by Ughelli on later church historians in his own country.

He was edited again in ten volumes at Venice by a priest called Niccolò Coleti, 1717-22. It is sometimes said that this edition is less reliable than the original, but it is usually in this edition that the work is consulted.¹⁰ Ughelli lies behind most subsequent histories of Italian dioceses.¹¹ His work is arranged under provinces (where they exist) and in the case of each bishopric it begins with a description of the diocese as it was in Ughelli's day and then deals with the *series episcoporum*; Coleti brings the information down to his own day. Ughelli carefully inserted all early documents he could find

and a few later ones and a fair amount of this early material now only survives in his pages. The immediate effects of his work can be seen in his correspondence, much of which can be read in the Barberini manuscripts in the Vatican Library. All over the peninsula he had correspondents, men of antiquarian tastes whose imagination he fired – not least by appealing to the sentiment of local loyalty: if a neighbouring bishopric was well covered by Ughelli it was important to secure a fair share for one's own. Later on, it may be added, when he lacked Italian source material, Gams in the *Series episcoporum ecclesiae catholicae* (1873–86) often took his names from Ughelli, and Eubel, when he failed to find an entry in Vatican records, took his from Gams. So Ughelli laid a heavy hand on the *Hierarchia catholica*.¹²

At the end of the seventeenth century, therefore, Italy had in Ughelli, in his predecessors and in his disciples and immediate successors, a wealth of technical scholarship bearing on the history of the Italian church well in advance of similar developments in other parts of Europe. Yet this start was to be lost and, two hundred years after his death, Italian church history had generally fallen on bad days. Perhaps a sign of this is that, despite the Italian mania for centenaries, the three hundredth anniversary of Ughelli's death in 1970 passed without any celebration. It is only lately that a few Italians are taking seriously the remarkable author of *Italia sacra*.¹³

And it is only lately – in effect since the Second World War – that a deliberate attempt has been made to raise the standards of church history in Italy. What are the faults that must be eradicated? Professor Eric Cochrane, in his recent survey of counter-Reformation scholarship in the *Catholic Historical Review* is one of the first historians to speak plainly.¹⁴ He is scathing about the continuing use of history by Italians to point morals, 'philosophy teaching by example', as he says; he stigmatises much of the end-product as chronicle not history; he identifies the absurdities of petty local loyalties, *campanilismo*; he concludes his tale of amateurishness and special pleading with severe reference to the influence of apologetics and homiletics. Cochrane's partial explanation for the neglect, or rather for the pious frivolity, with which Italians have treated their church history is the exclusion of theology and related subjects from the state universities after 1873. This secular and constitutional influence, which a recent monograph has discussed,¹⁵ is undoubtedly important, for it reflected the impressive anti-clericalism of good scholarship in all fields in Italy after unification.

Everything that Cochrane says seems only too true. And one

might argue that he does not go far enough. One aspect of the parochialism which he rightly deplors is the dispersion of source material in episcopal and capitular archives in three hundred cities or more. These are often ill-kept, difficult of access and inadequately catalogued; they were in a bad state often in Ughelli's day¹⁶ and they have not all improved since then. This strikes one as very odd considering the continuity of ecclesiastical institutions in Italy and repeated attempts, ever since the opening of the Secret Archives of the Vatican by Leo XIII in 1883, by the highest authorities to ensure proper care and reasonable access to documents in the charge of the diocesan authorities.¹⁷ This pressure, including recent papal action¹⁸ seems to have mostly been ineffective. Criticism has been both scholarly¹⁹ and hysterical,²⁰ but all too often a serious scholar has been obliged to abandon an interesting line of enquiry by 'l'ermetismo dell'archivio vescovile'.²¹ The matter is further complicated by the absence of 'registers' and the reliance on notarial acts, copies of which may survive in notarial archives even if not in episcopal repositories. Of course it would be absurd to suggest that all ecclesiastical archives are equally disorganised or inaccessible. It was the existence of the opposite state of affairs in a number of places which enabled Professor Robert Brentano to write his comparison of religious activity in thirteenth-century England and Italy in *Two Churches*.²² And of course the scholar in the Vatican Archives and Library is superbly treated. But interest locally seems often to be small and in a situation where recruitment of priests is dropping sharply it may well be that bishops are disinclined to take clergy who are competent in Latin off pastoral work for the sake of helping historical research.

Connected with these difficulties there are two others. The first is the large number of places where there should be records. Some 250 or so bishoprics existed in mainland Italy at the period with which this book is concerned and they mostly survive today.²³ Without prior calendaring or publication a survey of existing records by one man or even a sizeable team of men would take years. Second, even if such a survey were attempted it would reap a poor harvest, it may be suspected, for the period with which this book is concerned. The archives which were most cherished were those making grants of land. Of these there were some massive endowments, especially in early centuries, but only a trickle in the later Middle Ages. Documentation of all kinds was demanded as a result of the decisions of the Council of Trent. But for the fourteenth and fifteenth century church archives outside Rome seem to be sparse, even apart from the

havoc wreaked by German and Allied armies in the Second World War. Professor Giuseppe Alberigo has explained how, when he was preparing his work on Italian bishops at the Council of Trent,²⁴ he wrote to a hundred episcopal archivists and was told by half of them that records had been destroyed or dispersed for his period. Cardinal A. Mercati's estimate in 1942 was that 90 per cent of non-Vatican ecclesiastical records were fairly modern.²⁵ This is borne out by such indications as I have been able to follow up. One of the best regional surveys covers the archdiocese of Florence and it shows (apart from a few early charters) virtually 20 documents prior to 1500.²⁶ The capitular archives at Cosenza contain 293 pieces, running from 1195 to 1759; of these 29 are prior to 1500 and 9 only from the fifteenth century.²⁷ The Cesena study by Pietro Burchi already mentioned shows only a handful of documents prior to the sixteenth century.²⁸ That there are some very important exceptions will, however, emerge from many documents to be quoted later in this book.

Of course the bulk of archival records, ecclesiastical or secular, which have survived are bound to be overwhelmingly modern; the Italian situation regarding church records is in many ways not much different, it would appear, in France.²⁹ The richness of English medieval material is perhaps unusual; no other country has a series comparable to the publications of the Canterbury and York Society. But the almost total neglect in Italy of such local records as do survive from the later centuries of the Middle Ages makes it hard to generalise securely. With this one must link the deplorable state of the public libraries of Italy and the consequent dependence of scholars on the older books – like Ughelli but alas not always of his high standing.

To these desperate conditions I believe one must add the limitations on the history written by the regular clergy of Italy and of Orders maintaining historical institutions in Rome. The scholars working in this ambience do not, as far as I can judge, betray any confessional bias. Many of them are very good and methodical researchers. My criticism is that they are too often blinkered by their loyalties and concentrate, not on broader issues, but on the biographical trivia of their predecessors in, for instance, the Franciscan or Dominican families. How far this is due to the direction of superiors I do not know, although sometimes one suspects that only the senior members are encouraged to write wide-ranging studies, some of which will be referred to below. Paper, print, scholarship are all hard to come by nowadays, and I fear a great deal of these

rare commodities have been devoted to illustrating men and events of no significance whatever: how many man-hours have been spent in identifying the place and time of Savonarola's ordinations?³⁰ This one might perhaps accept as a question of some general interest, but many of the periodicals list similar details for thousands of dim and insignificant friars. (I shall have more to say on ordination lists later.)

These several handicaps affect to some extent all historians working on the problems of the church in Italy. There is an additional hazard for medievalists. This might be described as 'getting behind Trent'. For years I have been frustrated by the way reference books emanating from France and Italy have in practice neglected the later Middle Ages. I am thinking of the great French series of 'Dictionnaires', of the *Enciclopedia cattolica*. These works, if consulted on historical problems, discuss in detail the early church; and they discuss the post-Tridentine church. But they do not deal with the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and they tend to assume that the reforms enacted at Trent were immediately effective. I have now realised that my feeling of discomfort was shared by others. It was with relief that I discovered the views of Eric Cochrane (to whom I have referred already) and John Bossy, editor of the distinguished Birkbeck lectures given by H. O. Evennett, and of course the views of Evennett himself.³¹ They tally with my own and I find it a consolation that 'early modernists' want to determine those elements in their world which were old and those which were new.

Some of the results of the difficulties outlined above are worth stressing. A student interested in Italian church history in the late medieval or early modern ('Renaissance') period has no general work on which he may rely, nothing that is to say later than that remarkably informative *Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastica*, whose 103 volumes came out (at Venice again!) from 1840 to 1861 as a result of the labours of Gaetano Moroni. There are many interesting monographs, but even they are often flawed by an appalling unwillingness to look further afield; for instance the useful study of ecclesiastical law 'in the state of Milan' by Prosdocimi suggests that the author thought mortmain and clerical taxation were phenomena encountered only in Lombardy – let alone in the rest of Italy, let alone in Christendom at large – in short, as though he had never studied European history at all,³² and behind and beyond such myopia lies the conviction that, if one is interested in the history of the Italian church as a whole, one need only consult the history of the papacy.

It will be noted that the argument has come full circle. This brief survey began with Platina. It has in effect now arrived at Ludwig von Pastor. Pastor's history of the popes remains in most ways not only the latest but the best available survey of the Italian church in the fifteenth century. His work began to appear in German in 1886 and in translations into other languages soon after (English from 1891 onwards). Just as scholars in Italy from Muratori onwards felt they needed a new Ughelli, so now it would be wonderful to have a new Pastor. It would, of course, be different in many ways; ultramontane views such as his would look grotesque today and, as far as his Renaissance volumes go, the distinction he made between Christian and Pagan now seems quaint as well as tendentious. But his prejudices are readily seen, his care and accuracy have never been surpassed. How could one contemplate a new Pastor, however, since we have no up-to-date biographies of the popes of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and in as much as he was concerned with Italy much the same is true of the important cardinals and curial officers; there is hardly a diocese with a respectable history. As for lives of popes there is, to be sure, the shining example of Pius II who took care to write his own 'memoirs'³³ and has as a result been rewarded by several modern and fairly reasonable biographies.³⁴ For the rest, modern revision of papal history has concentrated for our period mainly on political and diplomatic questions on the one hand and on the other on the social history of Rome. The student of (say) English church history in the later Middle Ages has two sure guides in Hamilton Thompson and Dom David Knowles, catering respectively for the secular and the regular clergy. Nothing, absolutely nothing, like this exists for Italy.

Yet this situation looks like changing for there is certainly a new critical awareness among some Italian church historians. Besides earlier attempts at turning attention to archives in Italian churches³⁵ the Vatican has in recent times repeatedly tried to further archival reform at the diocesan and parochial level. The canonical obligation to maintain archives and make them available was repeated in the *Codex* of 1917-8 (Can. 375-8); when he was Cardinal Montini the present pope commented on the matter authoritatively in 1958.³⁶ In 1955 a papal commission had been appointed to survey local ecclesiastical archives. If these could be better arranged it would make it easier to abandon the assumption that the Italian church and the papacy are coterminous, an assumption fortified by the magnificent records at the Vatican and the working reference library there, superbly useful for church history.³⁷

It will take time to assess the effects that these innovations will have. More immediately apparent is the activity of a group of scholars who have founded the *Rivista di storia della chiesa in Italia*. Since 1946 the new journal has acted as a focus of sophisticated scholarship of a kind long familiar in trans-Alpine lands. Perhaps the erudition of the contributions is over-displayed, their footnotes sometimes vastly exceed their texts, they are still obsessed with bibliography sometimes to the exclusion of reflection. But they are trying to be both wide-ranging in their coverage of the Italian church, and they are trying to bring to their work something like the professionalism expected in other areas of scholarship. This activity is matched by a number of works of excellent scholarship, to some of which I shall refer in the course of these lectures. It may soon be the case that the church of the Italian 'nation' so feared by other 'nations' at Constance and later can be written about in a manner that will do justice to the importance of the theme, and on the basis of well-founded research.

A concluding complication is the continued political tensions which exist in church-state relations in Italy. The constitutional relationships imposed during the Risorgimento and re-negotiated in the Concordat of 1929³⁸ are all too obviously falling into fragments, but a whole range of current problems until very lately bedevilled ecclesiastical research, the most conspicuous of them being tithes.³⁹ Nor can one any longer regard the church at the highest level (pope and Italian cardinals) after the reign of John XXIII (1958-63) as speaking with one voice. Conciliarism, recently regarded as dead as a door-nail, is once more raising its head and some clergy regard this as hopeful and some as ugly. Historians who are Italians and who are to any degree devout are often divided between themselves and this is occasionally evident in their work, perhaps even accounting for the excessive documentation to which allusion has just been made.

The upshot of these complicated and interrelated developments must also be seen within the context of a political Italy committed to substantial political devolution and a 'state' which, at any rate since the Second World War, has lacked the means for effective central government. What the results of all this will be for church historians in the peninsula remains to be seen. Those of us working in most other lands on periods as remote as the Middle Ages and Renaissance must be grateful that we are at present exempt from such confusing uncertainties.