

ALEXANDER VI: (1431 - 1503, Pope from 1492 - 1503)

Alexander is the most notorious pope in all of history. He conducted a pontificate of nepotism, greed, ruthlessness, murder, and, as McBrien has described it, "unbridled sensuality." He became the leading figure in the saga of the Borgia family, both as a perpetuator of evil and a facilitator of the activities of the two most famous of his children, Cesare and Lucrezia.

The second and last of the Spanish popes literally bought his pontificate with bribes. Such a purchased election is called "simoniacal," and was easily accomplished with the greed of seventeen of the twenty-two cardinals voting for the new pope.

He was born Rodrigo Borgia near Valencia, Spain, the nephew of Callixtus, who made him a cardinal at the age of twenty-five (1456) and vice-chancellor of the Holy See (1457). As vice-chancellor, he amassed great wealth, lived an openly promiscuous life, and fathered seven children, both as a cardinal and the pope. Pius II, who had succeeded Callixtus and continued to support the rise in the church hierarchy of Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia, had to warn the young cardinal to refrain from his practice of participating in orgies. It was, as Pius expressed it, "unseemly."



Alexander VI Adoring the Risen Christ (Pinturicchio)

As a young man, Rodrigo was described as tall and handsome. Sigismondo de Conti speaks of him as a large, robust man, with a sharp gaze, great amiability, and "wonderful skill in money matters." Others admired his tall figure, florid complexion, dark eyes, and full mouth.

However, in his early sixties when he became pope, he apparently lost his physical charm. We have few portraits that can be identified as being truly of him; one depicts a bald, corpulent pope on his knees before the tomb of the risen Christ.

While a cardinal, he took as his mistress Vannozza de Catanei who bore him four children, including Cesare (born 1475) and Lucrezia (born, 1480). By the time he became pope in 1492, he had cast off Vannozza and acquired as a mistress the young Guilia Farenese, who was probably the mother of two or three additional children sired by Alexander. Before Vannozza, Rodrigo had fathered at least two children by one or more women whose names are lost to history.

Pope Innocent VIII died, and a political struggle ensued for the papacy. The bargaining was fierce, and when the votes were finally counted, Rodrigo Borgia, with the purchase of the vote of a ninety-six-year-old cardinal who no longer had all of his faculties, was elected. One of the six cardinals who could not be bought was Giuliano della Rovere, was to remain an enemy of the Borgias, and eventually would succeed Alexander VI as Pope Julius II, noted patron of Michelangelo, the "Warrior Pope."

During the elaborate ceremony consecrating Rodrigo as Pope Alexander VI, he had to be "verified" as a male, since, from the Thirteenth Century and the scandalous myth of "Pope Joan," a Pope John that was believed to have been a woman, newly elected popes had to submit to an

examination lying on a low seat. The fact that Rodrigo, prolific father, might be disguising his sex was an amusing sidelight to his rise from the low seat of genital examination to the high throne of Peter.

But Rodrigo, now Alexander VI, had learned something from his predecessor, the misnamed Innocent VIII, who was the first pope to acknowledge openly his illegitimate children, loading them with riches and titles. Alexander took advantage of the precedent.

After a strong beginning as pope, reforming the Curia and forbidding simony --- which is, of course, the means by which he had purchased the papacy --- Alexander concentrated his efforts on his primary interests. These were, like Innocent VIII, the acquisition of gold, the pursuit of women, and the interests of his family. However, Alexander made his predecessor look like a rank amateur. He named his son Cesare, then only eighteen, a cardinal, along with the younger brother of his current papal mistress, the even younger Alessandro Farnese. He arranged three marriages for his daughter Lucrezia, skillfully annulling the first, and, through the efforts of Cesare, conveniently making her a widow with the second. Lucrezia often was left in charge of the papacy --- in effect, a regent --- when Alexander was travelling from Rome.

Alexander forged alliances through the marriages of his children. For instance, he linked his power to that of the Milanese faction, uniting the Borgia and Sforza families, by marrying Lucrezia to Giovanni Sforza, the bastard son of Costanzo Sforza, cousin of the powerful cardinal, Ascanio Sforza. He solidified his position with the kingdom of Aragon and Naples by marrying his younger son, Jofre, to Sancia of Aragon., who would later cheat on her husband and engage in adultery with both Cesare and Giovanni, older brothers of Jofre.

In 1493, Alexander attempted to draw a line between Spanish and Portugese spheres of influence in the New World, but even this far-reaching political act had to be modified in 1494, since, in its original form, the decree favored his native Spain. He is also remembered for the torture and execution in 1498 of the famous Florentine preacher Savonarola, who had had the effrontery to denounce papal corruption and call for the removal of Alexander.

By 1500, Alexander's behavior --- with Cesare as a dominating influence --- became even more outrageous. Licentiousness and murder were the order of the day for both father and son.

Shortly after the eleventh anniversary of his accession to the papacy, August, 1503, Alexander fell ill. So did Cesare, and around this coincidence a rumor grew in Rome that some authorities, such as McBrien, believe to be true. Alexander and Cesare had dined with Cardinal Adrian Corneto at the latter's villa. It long had been believed that the Borgias had intended to make Corneto their next victim. Indeed, Corneto thought that he had been poisoned, but had saved himself by switching the cup that Cesare had prepared for him. The unsuspecting Alexander and Cesare both drank freely from it. Within a few days, Cesare recovered, but his father lingered for a few more days and died at the age of seventy-seven.

Burchard, the loyal servant and diarist, reported that Cesare's men forced their way into the Vatican and made off with all the treasure they could carry, this vandalism carried out while the pope was still clinging to life. As soon as Alexander died, his servants plundered his bedroom.

After Burchard had prepared the body, palace guards drove off the priests that were guarding the remains of the dead pope from the possible desecration of the irate (and quite joyous) Roman populace. Burchard had the body moved to a small chapel, where it remained unattended, slowly rotting in the humid August weather then gripping Rome.

When Burchard returned with servants to prepare the body for its final burial, he found Alexander bloated and discolored, the body so swollen that it would not fit into its coffin. The servants removed the pope's miter and literally stuffed him into the coffin.

So died Pope Alexander, at the height of glory and prosperity ...There was in him, and in full measure, all vices both of flesh and spirit ...There was in him no religion, no keeping of his word. He promised all things liberally, but bound himself to nothing that was not useful to himself. He had no care for justice, since in his days Rome was a den of thieves and murderers. Nevertheless, his sins meeting with no punishment in this world, he was to the last of his days most prosperous. In one word, he was more evil and more lucky than, perhaps, any other pope for many ages before."

--- Francesco Guicciardini (as reported in Chamberlain)

The power that Alexander possessed can be appreciated when one sees the almost total collapse of Cesare's empire upon his father's death. Julius II, Alexander's successor, had been one of the few cardinals that Alexander had been unable to buy in 1492, and he was clearly no friend of the Borgias.

But next to Cesare's ruthlessness, Alexander was comparatively mild.

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