

PLAYBOY POPES

Paul II

30 AUGUST 1464–26 JULY 1471

Although there could be a number of serious contenders for the title ‘top playboy pope’, Paul II must count as one of the front-runners. Born Pietro Barbo in 1417, he was the nephew of Pope Eugenius IV, ensuring him a rapid rise in the Church hierarchy. He was arguably the worst of the Renaissance pontiffs – vain, intellectually shallow and extremely ostentatious in his lifestyle.

He was a promoter of carnivals, to which expense he forced Roman Jews to contribute under pain of attack and closure of their businesses. He ran what today would be described as extortion and racketeering enterprises all across Rome and consorted with the city’s criminals.

Like some of his predecessors, Paul tried to mount a crusade against the expanding Turkish Empire and called on Christian kings to support him financially. His efforts bore little fruit, however, as he himself pocketed most of the money.

The King of Bohemia eventually suspected what he was doing and threatened to expose him, whereupon Paul excommunicated the King on the grounds that he was a Hussite (Protestant). Others who opposed Paul or spoke out against his playboy ways were arrested and tortured, as

Paul brooked no opposition. He died suddenly from a stroke at the age of fifty-four.

The Vatican Librarian, whom the Pope had bullied and tortured, took his revenge during the next pontificate by publishing a highly unflattering biography of Paul II.

Leo X

17 MARCH 1513–1 DECEMBER 1521

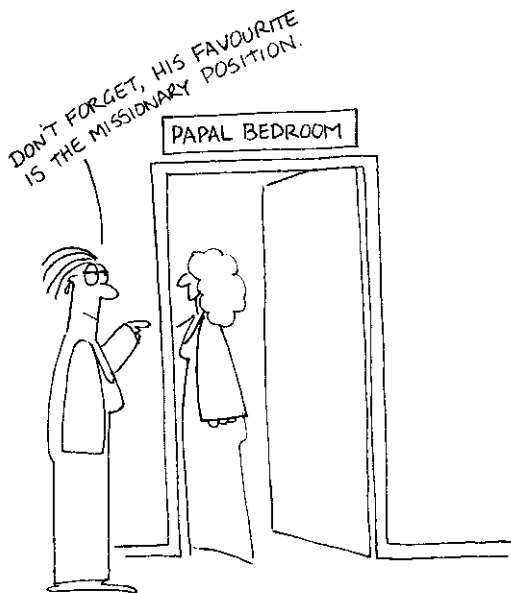
Giovanni de Medici (the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent) must also figure as a 'playboy pope', if only because of the amount of money that he squandered on himself and his surroundings. He had the floors of several of his palaces inlaid with gold. His banquets were the talk of Rome and he kept a private circus.

Leo had been made a priest at the age of seven and a cardinal at the age of thirteen. He was a Renaissance prince who loved fine wines, books, art, music, theatre and spectacle. He was determined to make Rome the cultural centre of Europe. Soon the Papacy was in serious debt and Leo was forced to sell off many Vatican treasures in order to meet his mounting bills.

Worse was to come. The Turkish Empire was expanding and Leo was forced, by a number of Christian kings, to call a crusade to limit its power. To finance this and also the building of a new St Peter's, he had to borrow on a

mammoth scale and to institute what would now be called a 'bargain sale' of Church offices, including cardinals' hats.

Even this did not bring in enough money and he began selling 'indulgences' – forgiveness for sins before they had been committed – in the wealthy German diocese of Brandenburg and Mainz. Leo appointed John Tetzel to preach the indulgences in January 1517 and, in response, a German monk, Martin Luther, posted his Ninety-five theses on the church door at Wittenberg, laying the foundations for the Protestant Reformation.



Seemingly unperturbed, Leo continued his extravagant lifestyle, further infuriating the reformers. He largely ignored the building spiritual crisis in the Church, in favour of hunting, lavish banquets and the development of the city as a cultural and hedonistic centre. As a religious storm broke around him Leo suddenly died in 1521 from malaria, leaving Italy in political turmoil and all the problems of the Church to his successor, the Dutchman Hadrian (Adrian) VI.

Clement VI

7 MAY 1342–6 DECEMBER 1352

Very few of the vicars of Christ can outdo the French Pope Clement VI for hedonism, drinking or living the good life. It was during Clement's reign that the expression 'drunk as a pope' was coined and it certainly reflected the easy-going, worldly style of this playboy pope.

Clement reigned at a time when the Papacy was in the hands of a series of French popes – the so-called 'Babylonian captivity'. Of all these popes, Clement was the most partisan, doling out senior Church positions to his relatives, friends and countrymen. Following on the heels of the rigid and austere Benedict XII, Clement sought to make the Church 'more accessible' and he did so with some style.

Born Pierre Roger, the former Benedictine monk had allegedly distinguished himself with his piety, but he was to abandon this as soon as he reached Peter's Chair. His pontificate was modelled less on the life of the Apostle and

more on that of a carnal, temporal prince. He loved luxury and his reign was punctuated by sumptuous banquets and spectacular festivals. His frugal predecessor Benedict had built up the Vatican coffers and Clement now shamelessly depleted them.

He kept a harem of French whores about his chambers, and there were persistent rumours that he also liked the company of young boys. Rumoured to have been caught several times with married women, he is believed to have been treated several times for syphilis, insisting each time that physicians be blindfolded before they examined him. A consummate winebibber, he was unable to say Mass on a number of occasions due to drunkenness.

As the Black Death swept into Avignon, Clement died after a short illness but not before he had defended the Jews of the city who were accused of poisoning Christian wells – the last, charitable act of an otherwise sensual and licentious playboy Pope.