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POPE GREGO

Alessandro Ludovisi: the First Jesuit-Educated Pope

by Tony Amodeo

On vacation in Rome in 2000, my Aunt Lella led me to a gem of a small piazza and up the steps of a church I hadn't seen before: Sant'Ignazio. Inside was an amazing cupola, but one that wasn't really there. There were also a vast ceiling fresco, portraits of Jesuit saints Stanislaus Kostka and John Berchmans, and the tomb of Jesuit saint Robert Bellarmine. The church also contained the impressive tomb of Pope Gregory XV.

Later on the same trip, I did a little research at a library in Modena on il Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri), the Bolognese painter and master draftsman. In one of the exhibit catalogs I recognized Ignatius in a large painting and learned that Gregory XV was Guercino's patron and the pope who canonized Ignatius and Xavier. Since then, I've been gathering additional information on this first Jesuit-educated pope. Here is some of what I've discovered.

Alessandro Ludovisi, born in 1554 to a notable family of Bologna, went to Rome as a young man to study with the Jesuits at the German College and Roman College, beginning barely more than a decade after Ignatius's death in 1556. This was before the *Ratio Studiorum*—the Jesuits' educational guide—was formalized in 1599, but the solid foundation he gained in rhetoric, philosophy, theology, and the humanities was to serve him well.

After finishing at the Roman College, he returned to Bologna and earned degrees and distinction in civil and canon law. A devout person, he made the decision to become a priest. Soon, he was asked back to Rome and was made a judge in the Church's court. He gained distinction for his ability to judge difficult cases fairly, and he rose rapidly in the ranks.

Succeeding popes sent him on diplomatic missions in Italy and abroad, and he was favorably looked upon by the parties he dealt with, Catholic and Protestant alike.

Ludovisi was later rewarded for his important diplomatic successes by being named archbishop of Bologna in 1612, and in 1616, cardinal. Unlike some prelates of his time, he took up residence in his diocese; he proved himself an able administrator and effective pastor, instituting several reforms of the local clergy.

When Pope Paul V died in 1621, Cardinal Ludovisi was in poor health, perhaps aggravated by his habit of fasting. Traveling from Bologna, he arrived at

the conclave a day late. The first day of balloting had not met with success, as the mix of voting cardinals (including Jesuit Robert Bellarmine) could not agree on a candidate. Influential nobles, family and national rivalries—unfortunate but major factors in conclaves at the time—created what threatened to be a long election. But Ludovisi's arrival was a catalyst. His reputation for moderation, good judgment, piety, kindness, and pastoral concern preceded him. And, probably, his age and his state of health made him in some minds a good "transitional" pope. Before long, he was declared pope by acclamation of the assembled body of cardinals—the last pope so elected.

The new pope

Gregory XV was a man of his times; he followed customary Church practice in making his young but capable nephew Ludovico a cardinal. Old and ill himself, the new pope put Ludovico in charge of carrying out his directives.

Among the first projects Gregory undertook was the reform of the papal election process. Attempting to prevent abuse and political manipulation, Gregory wrote papal bulls that redefined each step of the process, including a locked conclave of cardinals, a formal oath before voting, secret written ballots, and a required two-thirds majority for election, among other reforms. Gregory's new election process lasted without much change until Pope John Paul II added additional procedures in case of extended failure to elect by the required majority and removed election by acclamation and by compromise as modes of election.

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Renewed energy

Gregory XV pursued a number of interests during his papacy. He was an active promoter of the reforms of the Council of Trent. He unified the administration of the Church's expanding worldwide missionary activities by formalizing the congregation of the *Propaganda Fide*, the Propagation of the Faith, creating a board of cardinals to regulate and oversee mission activity and regain some control from national rulers. According to some, Propaganda Fide was structured on the Jesuit model of mission administration. Gregory used his personal fortune to erect churches and schools in mission lands, including Jesuit institutions in South America and the Philippines. He strongly supported the work of religious orders and canonized several founders and reformers, including Philip Neri, known as the apostle of Rome; Teresa of Avila, founder of the Discalced Carmelites; and, on the same day, Ignatius and Xavier.

The political and religious strife caused by the Thirty Years' War, which had begun before his papacy, was dividing Europe. Gregory did what he could to lessen some of these conflicts while promoting the Catholic cause. When he became pope, Spain and its ally, the Holy Roman Empire, were on the brink of war with France and her allies Venice and Savoy. The dispute centered on the Valtellina, a series of Alpine mountain passes critical to Spanish communication with the empire, and from there with Spain's possessions in the Netherlands, which France and her allies wanted to disrupt. Gregory put his brother Orazio



Pope Gregory XV by Bolognese painter Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (1591–1666).

in charge of the papal army and sent him, with a papal order, to control the Valtellina. The move maintained the peace until after Gregory's death.

Gregory's attempts to improve the lot of persecuted Catholics in England, Scotland, and Ireland resulted in the lessening of penal laws there. In some cases, as with Duke Maximilian's counter-reformation campaigns in Bavaria and Sigismund of Poland's struggle against the Turks, Gregory sent financial and moral aid to the Catholic side, which helped achieve or maintain Catholic rule. Overall, Gregory's conduct restored a measure of respect for the papacy, which had been through some trying times.

Scientific interest

As had his uncle, Ludovico had attended the Jesuits' German College and earned a law degree at Bologna. He was a man of intellectual depth and considerable talent—both of which he put at the service of the papacy.

Among Ludovico's activities was organizing the *Accademia dei Virtuosi*, which hosted intellectual discussions among some of Rome's leading minds. While Gregory was very interested in the sciences, perhaps due to his Jesuit education, he nevertheless feared that his presence might inhibit debate. His solution was to attend *Virtuosi* meetings in the Lateran palace unseen by participants, sitting in

a chair behind a large curtain in order to hear the discussions.

Two of Gregory's very astute secretaries, Virginio Cesarino and Giovanni Ciampoli, were friends, correspondents, and defenders of Galileo—another Jesuit alumnus. Had a younger and healthier Gregory survived through the 1630s, the final condemnation of Galileo might never have taken place.

Gregory's legacy

The Jesuit order in Rome had been growing substantially for some time. The international student body at the Roman College had grown to over 2,000 students, and the college had already moved from its original building into an abandoned convent. Their Chapel of the Annunciation, built in the 1560s, had already proven inadequate by the early 1600s.

Gregory's will included a generous donation to create a church there with the name of Saint Ignatius. His will also stipulated that Ludovico likewise donate substantially to this project. The result is the majestic Church of Sant'Ignazio. Set in a little piazza a few blocks from the far larger and more-ornate Jesuit church of Il Gesù, Sant'Ignazio is a beautiful gem that traces its origins to the laying of the cornerstone by Ludovico himself in 1626.

Some of the greatest minds of the day, from mathematicians to painters, dedicated their skills to designing the church. These included architect Carlo Maderno, artist Domenichino, and members of the Jesuit faculty of the Roman College, including mathematics professor Orazio Grassi.

The remains of Jesuit Robert Bellarmine lie beneath an altar in the church, but the saint is not alone in having Sant'Ignazio as his final resting place. A large, impressive tomb by students of Bernini contains the remains of Gregory and of Ludovico. In keeping with custom, patrons of the arts could have their names carved in the façade of the churches they built and also be buried there.

The church was still under construction when the centennial of the founding of the Jesuit order was celebrated

Jesuit Influences

As the first pope who was Jesuit-educated, Gregory apparently felt at ease dealing with the Society, intervening in inter- and intra-order conflicts when necessary. The Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili, a nephew of Bellarmine, had made great strides

on the Indian subcontinent by learning Tamil, studying the local religious traditions, and approaching the local population with respect for their culture.

As did Jesuit Matteo Ricci in his missionary work in China, De Nobili believed that converting the ruling class was the way to convert the common people. He tried to separate the essential core of Christianity from the European cultural elements in which it was interwoven. De Nobili presented the local Brahmins with that core, accommodating those cultural practices they held important within the framework of Christianity.

Other missionaries in the area, both of other orders and, notably, the

Portuguese Jesuits, mistook this effort as introducing paganism into Christianity and protested to Gregory. De Nobili argued that the people of the upper castes would fear a loss of status if forced to give up their dress and other signs of caste; they would therefore resist conversion, and this would impede the growth of the Church in this mission land.

Gregory took De Nobili's side, mandating, however, that the new converts, as Christians, were to overcome class prejudices and treat the *dalit*, the untouchables, with charity rather than disdain. De Nobili went on to convert thousands to Catholic Christianity. Unfortunately, Gregory's decision was overturned by later popes.



by Urban VIII in 1640. However, there were neither funds nor time to complete the church as originally planned. Eventually, the Jesuit art instructor of the Roman College, Andrea del Pozzo, got his students together and did the seemingly impossible.

When you walk into this beautiful church, you will notice a central cupola flanked by two smaller ones. Look again and you will notice that the ceiling is actually flat. Using the mathematical skills of the Roman College's faculty, Pozzo and his students created an impressive artistic illusion, a trompe l'oeil: Thanks to the genius of the art, which reached its zenith in Pozzo's day, the visitor sees the flat ceiling and the cupola as rounded—everything in perfect perspective from the ground-level viewer's vantage point.

Gregory XV died on July 8, 1623, two years and five months after his election to the papacy. But his short “transitional” papacy, like that of John XXIII in our own day, introduced reforms and changes that helped strengthen and reshape the Church in a time of crisis. His reign, though brief, was an important one not only for the Jesuits, who benefitted from Gregory's support of Jesuit works in Europe, the New World, and Asia, but also for the Church and for the world. ■



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PATRICK DENKER

The Jesuits' Sant'Ignazio church in Rome holds the magnificent tomb of Pope Gregory XV (below), the creation of students of sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

MARCUS BLEECH

