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Laschelles' "Pontifex maximus: A short history of the popes" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Lascelles, C. (2017). *Pontifex maximus: A short history of the popes*. London, UK: Crux Publishing. ISBN: 9781909979451.

In Walter Ullmann's preface to his 1971 work, *A Short History of the Papacy of the Middle Ages*, he asked: "Who would not be daunted by the prospect of treating, within a manageable compass, so long a period, and especially so central a subject, as the medieval papacy?" Christopher Lascelles, being not daunted in the least, delivers a snarky, light-hearted romp through the centuries, pope by pope, most in just a sentence or two. Lascelles only lingers, with evident relish, over scandal, rumor, or legend that confirms his dislike of his topic. Modern progressives have an active project in denying the papacy any moral suasion, to eliminate it as a rival, and he writes with them in mind.

Granted, there is plenty to dislike, or else we would all still be medieval Christians. The worst thief steals one's confidence. Rome's bishops gained eminence when far-flung churches asked them to settle their disputes. Heresies and controversies followed all roads to Rome, just as Washington, DC abounds in spies and lobbyists. This increased when churches in Palestine, North Africa, and Asia Minor fell to the Mohammedans. With the world falling apart, claims for spiritual authority would seem defensible, but it made the Roman See a rival to emperors, kings, kingpins, and many modern governments. It is rivalry, not power, which corrupts. Yet Lascelles never fails to side against the popes, monsters and reformers alike. He paints most popes as decadent hypocrites or blind fanatics. The Pope being Catholic rarely enters his thinking.

Rather, Lascelles mimics (and cites) Geoffrey Barraclough's *The Medieval Papacy*, which Ullmann, quoted above, characterized as full of "... superficiality, commonplace statements, clichés and meaningless generalizations." Lacking an index, this work is useless as a reference source, and a study of his endnotes reveals that most are his own asides. Overall, he sources a relative handful of popular or tendentious works in each chapter. Most academic libraries will prefer Ullmann's book, along with biographies of the most recent popes.

Reviewer

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