

St. Malachy's Prophecy of the Popes¹

by

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St. Malachy O'Morgair was born in Armagh in Ireland about 1094. At a remarkably early age he became Bishop of Connor, and then Archbishop of Armagh. In 1139, on his way to Rome, he stopped at the Abbey of Clairvaux where he became so attached to St. Bernard that on reaching his destination he begged the Pope to allow him to end his days in spiritual retreat amongst the holy abbot's disciples. The Pope not merely refused to allow this, but even added to St. Malachy's administrative responsibilities by making him Papal Legate for Ireland. But in a sense the Irish Saint had his wish. He was in continual correspondence with St. Bernard, and with his collaboration he founded, in 1142, the first Cistercian monastery in Ireland. Six years later he set out on a second visit to Rome and stopped again at Clairvaux, where he was taken seriously ill; and it was actually in the arms of St. Bernard himself that he died some three weeks later, having told the monks that his illness would be fatal. St. Bernard preached a most eloquent sermon at the funeral; and so great was his esteem and affection for St. Malachy that he dedicated another sermon to him a year later, on the anniversary of his death, and also wrote a short biography of him for the edification of the faithful.

St. Malachy was canonized by Pope Clement III in 1190, and the celebration of his feast is on November 3rd, the day after his death. His life was remarkably rich in miracles and visions;² but neither in St. Bernard's biography nor in other contemporary sources is there any mention of a prophecy about the Popes. This has always been the chief argument of those who have doubted its authenticity. None the less, suffice it to say here that if the prophecy in question is a mere invention, then clearly it was not St. Malachy who invented it. But if it is a genuine prophecy—and this article may help the reader to make up his mind on that score—then it is more

1. This article was first published in *Tomorrow*, Summer 1966. We publish it here on request, and for this new edition the author has added several paragraphs.

2. As St. Bernard tells us, St. Malachy had been questioned some years previously by his disciples at Melfont Abbey as to where of all places he would wish to die and be buried. He had replied that if it were to be in Ireland, he would wish it to be beside the tomb of St. Patrick, but that otherwise he would wish it to be at the Abbey of Clairvaux. They then asked him what day of all days in the year he would choose for his death and he replied that he would choose the Feast of All Souls. (See Ailbe J. Luddy, *Life of St. Malachy*, M.H. Gill and Son, Dublin, 1950.

reasonable to assume that St. Malachy himself was the author, as tradition tells us, than to suppose that it should be rightfully ascribed to some other person who was endowed with the gifts of the Spirit.

Moreover, if St. Bernard did not single it out for mention, or even if he knew nothing about it, there is an obvious explanation. St. Malachy was a man of so many undoubted miracles, and so many visions which had proved true in his life-time, that by comparison the prophecy of the Popes was not worth mentioning. Its truth had yet to be proved. In itself, at that time, it could not have seemed to be of any particular significance. Who would have been interested to hear that there would be 112 more Popes between then and Doomsday? It would have seemed incredible to almost everyone that the second coming of Christ could be so far off. Not is the text of the prophecy in any way sensational. Only one Pope is actually mentioned by name and, as for the others, each is indicated by no more than a short Latin phrase which often refers to nothing of greater interest than the family coat of arms of the man in question.

Presumably, since the prophecy refers to the future, its vision and formulation took place during the reign of Pope Innocent II who died in 1143. At any rate, the first Pope mentioned in the text is indicated by the words *Ex castro Tiberis*, “from a castle on the Tiber,” and this clearly refers to Pope Innocent’s successor, Celestine II, who was born in a castle near the town of Castello on the River Tiber. That the opening of the prophecy refers to this Pope is made doubly clear by the fact that the second reign is summed up in the words *Inimicus expulsus*, “the enemy driven out,” and Celestine II’s successor, Lucius II, who reigned for only a few months (1144-1145), had the family name of Caccianemici, which expresses precisely the idea of driving out enemies.

To take another early example, Nicholas Breakspeare, the only Englishman ever to become Pope—he was Pope Adrian IV (1154-1159)—is designated by the words *De rure albo* which mean literally “from out of the white country” or more precisely “countryside”. The “white country” is Albion, so called because it appears “white” to those who come to it by the nearest possible sea route. But the adjective *albus* has repercussions which go beyond the name of Albion in this context, for although Nicholas Breakspeare was of “rural” origin, he may be considered also as a man of St. Albans which was the nearest town to his native village; and at the time when he was elected Pope he was Cardinal Bishop of Albano in Italy.

The prophecy did not become generally known until the end of the sixteenth century, more than 400 years after St. Malachy’s death. It was at Venice, in 1595, that Arnold Wion published his *Lignum Vitae (The Tree of Life)*, a collection of short biographies of eminent members of the Benedictine Order in its many branches, of which the Cistercian Order is one; and in connection with St. Malachy the text of the prophecy was included. It immediately caused a stir, but some had doubts about its authenticity. Such doubts were grounded not only on the absence of any extrinsic or intrinsic evidence that it was the work of St. Malachy, but also on the fact that the antipopes were included in the list as well as the true Popes whose function they had usurped. It must be admitted however, that the inclusion of the antipopes can also be taken as an

argument on the other side, since it is scarcely conceivable that a mid-sixteenth century forger would have deliberately “marred” his fabrication by including anyone who was not a true Pope. On the other hand, assuming that this is not a forgery, it is by no means the only true prophecy, to say the least, which contains certain “stumbling blocks”. What is puzzling is not so much that the text should include the antipopes as that it should condemn only two of them outright (which it does by applying to them the words *Schismaticus* and *schisma*), while speaking of the others in apparently “neutral” terms. Whatever the explanation may be—and it is unlikely to be forthcoming, for presumably we shall never know the form of the vision on which the prophecy was based—those who denied outright its authenticity at the time of its publication, or soon after, appear to have been comparatively few. It was accepted as genuine by many, even in some Protestant circles. Others not unnaturally preferred to reserve their judgment. As far as the past was concerned, the truth of the text was crystal clear; but it is easy to forge a “true prophecy” about the past. If, however, this was not a forgery, the future could be relied on to demonstrate its truth.

Today, now that another 400 years all but ten have gone by, most of that future has become past history, and the prophecy has certainly stood the test of time. As regards the text itself, it is not possible to make a distinction between that part of it which was already past at the date of publication and what was still in the future. Its brief descriptions continue to be so apt that confirmed skeptics have been driven to wonder whether the Cardinals did not sometimes choose a Pope to fit the prophecy, or in other cases whether the Pope himself had not deliberately taken action to make the prophecy “come true”. Would Pope Pius VI (1775-1799) have taken the then altogether unprecedented step of paying a visit to the imperial court of Vienna if he had not been styled *Peregrinus Apostolicus*, “the journeying heir of the Apostles”? But there were, in fact, compelling political reasons for that initiative; nor in any case would a single state visit to a neighboring country be adequate to the word *peregrinus* which suggests more in the way of travel. That “more” was to come: the prophecy not seldom refers to unforeseeable things over which neither Pope nor Cardinals could have the slightest control, and the papacy of Pius VI is a case in point for the word *peregrinus* would seem to refer above all to the tragic end of his life, which he certainly had not planned. In 1798 he was taken prisoner by the French Republican army and forced to travel from Rome to Siena, then to Florence, then Turin, from there across the Alps to Briançon, then to Embrun, Gap, Grenoble, and finally Valence where only death put an end to his “peregrinations”, for the Directoire had already decided to transfer him to Dijon. But if all this was tragic from an individual point of view it was also, to the exasperation of his atheist captors, something of a triumphal procession—such were the marks of devotion shown to the Pope by the people of Italy and France wherever he went.

Another feature of the prophecy which rules out any planning ahead is that the text does not always refer directly to the Pope himself, so that even after the election it may continue to be a riddle, which is however always solved before the death of the pontiff in question. Pius VI was succeeded by Pius VII (1800-1823) whose reign is indicated by the words *Aquila rapax*, “the

rapacious eagle”. These words could not possibly be made to fit the newly elected Pope; but after nine years it suddenly became clear that the *aquila* was Napoleon, who is often described as eagle-like in appearance and who proved himself “rapacious” by snatching the Pope from Rome and keeping him captive at Savona from 1809 and then at Fontainebleau from 1812 until his own fortunes began to decline and Pius was eventually able to return to Rome where he showed himself extremely magnanimous both to the exiled and dying emperor and to the Bonaparte family in general.

Another striking designation is *De Balneis Etruriae*, “from the baths of Etruria,” which refers to Pope Gregory XVI (1831-1846) who was of the Order of the Camaldoli, which originated at Balneo (from the Latin *balneum* which means bath) in Tuscany, as Etruria is now called. Passing on from him, the papacy of Pius IX (1846-78) is referred to in the words *Crux de cruce*, “cross from cross,” generally taken to mean that the troubles of this Pope, the cross he had to bear, came to him from the House of Savoy, whose coat of arms has a cross as its most dominant feature. These troubles culminated in the capture of Rome by King Victor Emmanuel in 1870 and the Pope’s loss of what little temporal power he had left.

The next Pope, Leo XIII (1878-1903), is *Lumen in caelo*, “a light in heaven”; and whatever more profound meaning this may have also, it is sufficiently explained by the arms of the Pecci family in which there is a comet on an azure ground. Much the same may be said of his successor, Pius X (1903-1914) whose reign is indicated by the device *Ignis ardens*, “a blazing fire”, which finds an immediate explanation in the six-rayed star that figures in his family arms. During his reign those who knew the prophecy were in some trepidation with regard to the words *Religio depopulata*, “the depopulated religion,” which denoted the reign of the Pope who was to follow. It was predicted that during the reign of this Pope atheism would take thousands of men and women away from religion. This in fact happened; and although the spread of atheism had started before and has been continuing ever since, it was actually in this reign that the first communist state was established. That key to the prophecy was not available until three years after the election. But it was not necessary to wait until then to see the aptitude of St. Malachy’s words. By the time that the Pope in question, Benedict XV, came to the throne, in the autumn of 1914, another tragic cause of “depopulation”—but in a totally different sense—had become only too clear.

The next device, *Fides intrepida*, “intrepid faith,” is less striking but it is none the less particularly apt with regard to Achille Ratti, Pope Pius XI. As to the next, St. Malachy here leans as it were across a span of 800 years to pay tribute to one of the most saintly of the Popes, for Pius XII (1939-1958) is *Pastor angelicus*, “the angelic shepherd”.

Many will remember that in his reign the words *Pastor et nauta* “shepherd and sailor”, which denotes his successor, were often interpreted to mean that a non-Italian would be elected, one who would have to come to the Vatican from across the sea. Might it not be Cardinal Spellman for example? But it had escaped people’s notice that one of Italy’s Cardinals was already in any case a sailor, whether he had to cross the sea to the Vatican or not, and that was

the Patriarch of Venice, for every Venetian, that is, everyone whose normal means of transport is the gondola, may be called *nauta*. Moreover Roncalli (John XXIII) had also been, in his youth, a shepherd in the literal sense.

Flos florum, “the flower of flowers”, that is, the lily, comes next in the prophecy, and as in the case of *Lumen in caelo* the meaning is clearly heraldic, for the fleur-de-lis is a prominent feature of the arms of the Montinis, the family of Paul VI. As to the words *De medietate lunae*, “concerning the middle (or the half) of the moon” which denote the reign of his successor, they had been, over the centuries, the basis of some strange speculations. In general it was concluded that since the half moon had no particular significance it must be the crescent that was indicated, and that the reference was therefore to Islam. Some even predicted that under this pontiff there would be general conversion of Muslims to Christianity. No one thought that “the moon” could simply mean “the month”. If that suggestion had been made, it would have been dismissed as pointless by the question: “What month?”. The true answer, “the single month for which he will reign”, could only have been given by St. Malachy himself, or one like him. The reference is clearly to the inauspicious sign which was to be seen exactly at the middle of the lunar month when the rising full moon was eclipsed; and we are now in a pontificate which is expressly related to an eclipse, *De labore solis*, “concerning the eclipse of the sun”, yet another of those devices which will only become clear in due course.

At this point a few observations may not be out of place, if only for the sake of those who, without time for reflection, are here newly confronted with this laconic list of Popes, which might well give rise to mixed feelings. The devices are apt enough; but to what purpose was the prophecy made? The motive behind it seems to have been exclusively quantitative, that of a chronicler bent on registering carefully, with no omissions, everyone who could be said from any point of view to have held a papal office, even the antipopes. We look in vain for any qualitative element whatsoever, apart from the praise implicit in the devices which denote the last two Piuses, *Fides intrepida* and *Pastor angelicus*. But a moment’s reflection tells us that this document has indeed the right to be purely quantitative, and that therein, precisely, lies its purpose. We realize moreover that in it St Malachy is speaking, not to the men of his own times, but directly to us and through us to all men now alive; for if it is of little interest to be told that there will be a hundred and twelve more Popes, it is quite another matter to be told that there will only be two more, and that is what the prophecy tells us today. These last two pontificates are denoted as follows:

111 *De gloria olivae*, “concerning the glory of the olive.”

112 *In persecutione extrema sacrae Romanae Ecclesiae sedebit Petrus Romanus qui pascet oves in multis tribulationibus; quibus transactis civitas septicollis diruetur, et Judex tremendus judicabit populum*, “In the final persecution of the Holy Roman Church, Roman Peter will sit upon the throne. He will feed his flock amid many tribulations, and

when these things have been brought to pass, the city of the seven hills will be destroyed and the terrible Judge will judge the people.”