



The Pope Who Quit: A True Medieval Tale of Mystery, Death, and Salvation

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At the close of the tumultuous Middle Ages, there lived a man who seemed destined from birth to save the world. His name was Peter Morrone, a hermit, a founder of a religious order, and, depending on whom you talk to, a reformer, an instigator, a prophet, a coward, a saint, and possibly the victim of murder. A stroke of fate would, practically overnight, transform this humble servant of God into the most powerful man in the Catholic Church. Half a year later, he would be the only pope in history to abdicate the chair of St. Peter, an act that nearly brought the papacy to its knees. What led him to make that decision and what happened afterward would be shrouded in mystery for centuries. *The Pope Who Quit* pulls back the veil of secrecy on this dramatic time in history and showcases a story that involves deadly dealings, apocalyptic maneuverings, and papal intrigue.

The Pope Who Quit: A True Medieval Tale of Mystery, Death, and Salvation Details

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Richard Booth says

Pietro di Morone of Abruzzi was a simple, minimally educated but literate, Benedictine monk-priest who decided that his vocation lay in the life of an hermit. He left the confines of the monastery, therefore, and moved to remote mountain areas, living alone in a cave. Other monks began to follow his lead and when sufficient numbers became hermitic, he began his own Papal-sanctioned branch of the Benedictine order. Living an extremely sacrificial life, he spent his days and nights fasting and praying. Becoming quite well-known for his sanctity and divestiture of worldly and monastic comforts, people began to come within the temple of his quietude. Pietro was an inward man for the most part; however, he was also a critic of problems within the Church, about which he wrote letters. Pietro lived in a time during which the authority of the Church alone was intermingling with new scientific discoveries and empirical evidence. Universities were being built in greater numbers, which was only one of many social changes occurring in his time. He lived contemporaneously with St. Francis of Assisi, the first official stigmatic, Bonaventure, Franciscan philosopher Roger Bacon, Averroes, and other notables. Nicholas IV was the Bishop of Rome and died during a period of secular preoccupations and movement away from Christian principles. It was within this general setting that the cardinal-electors thought about the remote hermit as the successor of Nicholas. Part of their motivation was to re-ignite spiritual fires within Christians, but another was to use Pietro as a bridge to the pope who would follow him. Pietro was an octogenarian hermit when elected Pope. His reign went badly, since he was not inclined toward money, bureaucracy, or personnel management. In the end, he resigned. The only other Pope to resign or retire was Benedict XVI in the 21st Century.

Selecting Pietro for the throne of St. Peter was an error soon regretted. His personality and interests simply did not fit the role of Church leader, albeit he had created and led his own order for many years.

Interestingly, after a prolonged conclave, Pietro (Celestine V) was vocally acclaimed Pope “quasi ex inspiratione,” or out of personal inspiration on the part of an elector.

The author recreates a real historical being in Celestine V, including his sanctity, limitations, strengths, and overall character. There is a very good reckoning of the 1200s that comes to life in this book. It is well-written and well-sourced, with limitations acknowledged. For those interested in history, particularly ecclesial and cultural history, this book is recommended. A world is resurrected through words here. The author does an excellent job.

Greg says

Peter Morrone, who in an unlikely twist was raised late in his life to the papacy as Celestine V, until the recent abdication of Benedict the XVI, was the only Pope to abdicate his office. The question of why is an interesting one, and it is a question that Sweeney sets out to answer.

There are many positives with this book. First, the story is a truly interesting one. Morrone was an influential spiritual ascetic. Following in the grand tradition of the desert fathers, he retreated to the foothills of northern Italy to live a purely spiritual, hermit existence. The reputation of his holiness spread, and he attracted many followers. Fearing another great schism, he confronted the paralysis of the cardinals in selecting a pope with a strongly worded letter. Unexpectedly, they elected him to the papacy. He did not want the office, was not very good at it, and therefore abdicated. This is the simplistic story.

situation. He talks about how Nicholas II had declared Church independence from the state in 1059, with election to be made solely by the cardinals and without influence from the outside, but in 1292, this declaration was still not being enforced. (34) He talks about the interference of Charles II and the political ambitions of which Celestine V appeared to be completely ignorant and incapable of confronting on equal terms. He talks about very real threats of physical violence during such elections as well as afterwards, noting the examples of the election of Pope Damasus I in 366, which resulted in an attack on the followers of the chief competitor and required the intervention of Roman troops. The election of Leo V was so contentious in 903 that 3 months after he was elected he was strangled by the antipope. Riots broke out in 1378 on the death of Pope Gregory XI. (39) Giles of Rome in the 13th century had inferred that even fallible men became a saint in the office of the Pope. However, there were many examples of men who were not so influenced. Examples would be Stephen VI, who exhumed his predecessor's rotting corpse for a trial. John XII was a particularly bad example, who ordered executions, turned the Apostolic Palace of the Lateran into a brothel, and was murdered by the husband of his mistress. Benedict IX sold his office then tried to reclaim it. (47) "Celestine V was the latest, and for many, the last, hope of those who believed that a man could wield both political and spiritual power and rule the one apostolic Church and the world with the wisdom of King Solomon and the compassion of Christ." (226) This hope became the tragedy, as it became abundantly clear that he had no interest in wielding this power, humbly attempting to live his life much as he had before the papacy.

The man who would become Boniface VIII is much maligned in the book. Sweeney constructs a largely circumstantial case that implies Boniface VIII first proposed Morrone's election, then whispered thoughts of abdication in his ear, only to cement his own election to the papacy. As the only man following the abdication of a living Pope, he perceived in the living Celestine V as a threat to his own papacy, should the abdication be reconsidered. He therefore placed Morrone under house arrest at his personal estate, the evidence would say in much discomfort, until his death.

The book does range a bit from the central topic. The narrative history flows disjointedly, given the very brief period of events, and tries to weave a tapestry of history and intrigue. There is much gossip in the book, and this I found somewhat off-putting. Ultimately, however, I did learn what I think is the full story from this book, and it is a story worth learning.

Marcia says

This is a very readable book about Medieval Italy. Jon Sweeney, the author, has an easy, conversational style. The book relies heavily on Peter Morrone's own *Autobiography* for details. Sweeney shows a true mastery of the culture of Medieval times as he seeks to explain the unexplainable decision of Morrone to abdicate the papacy. Morrone was a true hermit and had no need of the world and its trappings. At first, he accepted the decision of the Cardinals but soon regretted it.

Mark McTague says

Having read laudatory and critical reviews online, I would say the truth of the book lies with both. It is a broad overview of the papacy and church politics of the late medieval period, and as such is interesting to readers unacquainted with the period (as I was). Sweeney describes with fair clarity not only some changes in the process of papal election but also church and lay persons involved, as well as the interests that were served. I found my own view of the modern Catholic church and its leaders echoed in Sweeney's description

of the period. The Church leaders' subject and avowed interest may be spiritual, but their methods and actions are as political as any government administration's. And for those unacquainted with Church history who felt shock at the sex abuse and money laundering scandals of the past 30-40 years, Sweeney's book shows that such moral failings at high levels are nothing new. So for those reasons I enjoyed the book.

However, as one reviewer has described well, a clear, intimate portrait of Peter Morrone, Pope Celestine V, suffers as a result of the attention given to the larger historical context. At times the Pope seems to fade from view. This may be an artifact of the sources available. Sweeney made use of numerous secondary sources (various biographies of Morrone and histories of the period), but one wonders how detailed the primary documents were on Morrone.

Overall, I'd say Sweeney struck a rough balance between the man and his epoch, and for a general reader wholly unfamiliar with the subject, I think the book delivers. As for the complaint that the book does not deliver on the promise of a tale "as exciting and compelling as any novel or film," I would agree. This is no DaVinci Code, but then again, that back-cover line was from another reviewer of the book, a Jesuit writer, so the reader is advised to "consider the source."

Alan says

Interesting medieval non-fiction story of Pope Celestine V, the only pontiff to ever voluntarily leave the position ... until earlier this year. A longer review can be found here:
<http://eyesandearsblog.blogspot.com/2...>

Matt says

Jon Sweeney shows himself to be a master story teller in this biographical account of Franciscan Peter Morrone, who became Pope Celestine V.

Inspired in part by recent references to this legendary Pope who resigned from office only months after taking on the job (most notably by Benedict XVI), Sweeney weaves a tale of inspiration and intrigue surrounding this man who entered the Papacy with a vision of purity of heart and purpose only to leave that vision behind months later and ultimately suffering (allegedly) death at the hands of his successor.

Sweeney bring his own voice to this read and picks up every nuance that a reader may even miss, so the audio is definitely an expansion of the experience of this title. This one goes to the top of my list of recommendations. You can find the CD here, Franciscan Media and the downloadable version here, Audible dot com.

Jennifer says

While a well-researched and written biography of Celestine V (Peter of Morrone), I was expecting more of an investigation into the scandal surrounding Celestine's resignation. Not a bad book, by any means, but not quite what I wanted.

That said, Sweeney is meticulous in his research, and careful not to classify or imply as fact any questionable

theories. I appreciate that in a biography.

Robin Sencenbach Ferguson says

Written before Benedict XVI (in fact, the author, which I found rather amusing, firmly stated that despite the many rumors about Benedict's retirement that he would never do such a thing), stepped down, "The Pope Who Quit" is a historical study of Celestine V, the (previously) only pope to do the unthinkable--step down from this holy--and powerful--office. His legacy is a divisive one. On the one hand, Celestine became St. Celestine V in the years after his death and was celebrated as a man too holy for this world. On the other hand, history has been a harsh critic, with Dante himself placing (an admittedly nameless) Celestine in the vestibule of Hell in "Inferno" and numerous other critics labeling him as weak or stupid. Author Jon Sweeney sought to study the character of this short-lasting pope to determine both Celestine's real character as well as his abdication's impact on the papacy and Christianity as a whole.

This seems to be a big task for a book that's relatively short, just about 250 pages. But Sweeney's greatest challenge is not the volume of material, it's the lack thereof. Most of the information about Peter's pre-Holy Father life comes from his Autobiography, which is written in both first and third person, making it questionable not only if Peter wrote the entirety of the work but if he wrote any of it. Many of his other sources are considered hagiography (which are the writings of the life of a saint. Just wanted to save you some time in looking it up, because I had to), which are hardly unbiased. Still, Sweeney pieces together the evidence he has, while also using the culture of the medieval period and of the Catholic Church to make educated assumptions. Sweeney doesn't make wild speculation, which is always appreciated.

Still this is less of a study of a person as much as it is the study of a very critical time in Church history. World powers were starting to strain under the authority of the Church, while the Pope was seeking to extend his power. The Church was divided and corrupted, with the most powerful Cardinals seeking to glorify their power-seeking families rather than God, while zealots like St. Francis of Assisi sought to bring a spiritual awakening to the Church. The Church was a few popes away from facing the Great Schism, during which different popes vied for power for decades, and the conflict was quickly paving the way for the future Reformation. Sweeney sets the scene for us, of a Church in desperate need for unity and revival, looking to reclusive monk Peter Morrone for salvation. No wonder the Church was puzzled by Celestine's seeming lack of ability to lead and disappointed at his short-lived reign

And here is where Sweeney slips. His final assessment of Celestine V is critical--that he was unable to cope with the task and instead chose to save his soul rather than the Church. But I felt Sweeney's whole work showed the inevitable truth that Celestine would never have been able to "save" the Church from itself. The politics and culture of the Church were too ingrained for a simple friar to make much of an impact. And such high expectation could never have been fulfilled. So Celestine is a rather tragic figure--a man of great faith, doomed to failure as a pope, trying to seek God in his little hermitage he built in the basement of sumptuous palace he lived in.

Overall, I enjoyed Sweeney's writing but disagreed with his final premise. However, this was an excellent cultural study of the Church in the Medieval period and of a simple, godly man who simply wished to be at peace worshipping God, even if it meant giving up the seat of St. Peter.

Rich Stone says

Picked this up on a whim at the library and it was an easy and enjoyable read.

The subject of the book is Peter Morrone who became Pope Celestine V in August of 1294 at age 84 and resigned in December of the same year. Peter was best known for living a contemplative, hermit-like existence for well over half of his life which was unusual for Popes during that period who characteristically were far more involved with church and secular politics. It should be noted that very few sources exist that comment on the hermit stage of Morrone's life and the author handles this by indicating when he is speculating and by providing some interesting contextual information about the papacy and politics during this general time period (13th Century).

Celestine's papacy is not a successful one. His selection comes after he writes a somewhat apocalyptic letter to the cardinals responsible for choosing a new pope after they have been deadlocked for over a year. Oddly enough Peter (Celestine) is chosen basically by acclamation after receipt of this letter. He eschews the grand "coronations" characteristic of the times and decides to reside humbly in Naples as opposed to Rome. To make a long story short, Charles II's (of Naples) influence over Celestine coupled with Celestine's lack of interest in mundane day to day administrative tasks expected from a pope does not result in a successful papacy. After roughly 15 weeks Celestine quits (unprecedented for a Pope) and is imprisoned for the remaining 1-2 years of his life. The author speculates that Celestine's successor (Boniface VIII) may have participated actively or at least passively in hastening Celestine's death.

Since it was unprecedented Celestine's resignation drew mixed reactions from contemporaries. Although he is not explicitly identified in Dante's Inferno as Celestine a shade is encountered outside the first ring of hell who's described as one "who made through cowardice the great refusal". If this is Celestine he's in a very unflattering place for a former pope. Conversely, in 1313 Pope Clement V canonizes Celestine V.

The author pursues a speculative line of thought that this rejection of a pious pope may have contributed to the negative events impacting the Roman Church over the next couple of centuries - the exile of the papacy to Avignon, the schism (multiple popes), and eventually the reformation.

One interesting side note. The book was written in 2012 and the author makes the point that the illness John Paul II suffered late in his life must have tempted him to consider resigning (he of course did not). Ironically, his successor (Benedict XVI) became the second pope to resign in 2013 so if the author could have waited for another year he would have had a better modern comparison.

Kris says

I thought that this book sounded very interesting. It is about Peter Morrone, the pope who quit. A hermit, a reformer, an instigator, a prophet, a coward, a saint, and possible murder victim... it all depends on who you talk to. That really made me interested in the book, which I received for free through Goodreads and was able to read before it hit stores 2/14/12.

After I got the book in the mail I realized that I might not be the ideal reviewer they are looking for thought because the book is by Image Catholic Books and I am an atheist, but here are my thoughts.

Growing up in an Anabaptist background I had taken church history in Mennonite school, so I know a bit about this time period in church history.

I would recommend this book to Catholics because if you are going to be catholic I think you should know your church history. I would also recommend this book to all Christians because like the Catholics, if you are

going to be a christian you should know church history.

Jordan says

An okay story about an interesting Pope which ultimately shows we don't have enough information to actually write a book about him. Provides cursory and eclectic information about the Church and Europe at the time, plus references to modern developments on certain issues. With some speculation thrown in to round it out to short/mid length book status.

Michel says

A well researched book on a fairly unimportant anecdote, it casts a harsh light on the papacy. Interesting that it should be published by a Catholic publishing house.

Joseph Adelizzi, Jr. says

I cannot get over the fact that throughout a sixteen year Catholic education I never once was taught the history of Celestine V, A.K.A. Peter Morrone, a spiritual hermit of the Abruzzi region of Italy who was elected Pope but served only from the end of August to mid-December 1294 before abdicating. That neglected history is handled superbly, with the right amount of historical and ecclesiastic context, by Jon M. Sweeney in his outstanding book "The Pope Who Quit."

It would be so easy to give in to the semi-humorous conclusion that Celestine V simply embodies the Peter Principle wherein someone rises to the level of his or her incompetence. Thankfully Sweeney does not take the easy route, but unfortunately he does entertain Dante's opinion of Peter's abdication: "... I looked and I beheld the shade of him/ Who made through cowardice the great refusal." As if tagging Peter with cowardice was not enough, Sweeney goes on to say Dante's refusal to explicitly name Peter as the object of this derision was, according to the Dante Encyclopedia, Dante's way of emphasizing Peter's "complete lack of character." However, I disagree with that assessment even as I know full well there is not now nor will there ever be any encyclopedia based on my ruminations. To me any conclusions stoning Peter for cowardice or lack of character or "pusillanimous irresponsibility" are conclusions formulated from an improper or unfair or incomplete (can you tell I'm struggling here for the right word?) frame of reference.

Peter Morrone loved the Catholic Church. It was that love which prompted Peter to send a letter of "apocalyptic foreboding" to the College of Cardinals when that esteemed body could not decide on a new pope after more than two years of deliberations following the death of Pope Nicholas IV, warning them they were duty bound by the future of the Church to elect a Pope without further delay. Unfortunately for Peter, his letter "inspired" the dean of the sacred college, Latino Malabranca Orsini, to successfully nominate Peter Morrone as the next pope. One can only imagine Peter's reaction when he got the news: "Say what?"

Peter Morrone did not love the catholic church. In fact, until he became Pope Celestine V I doubt Peter even knew the catholic church. He didn't know the depths of the political maneuvering and posturing so prevalent within the church. He didn't know of the vast administrative and fiscal responsibilities of the church. In fact, if there were an encyclopedia based on my ruminations it would explain how Peter fell into the crevasse between "religion" and "we-ligion." His religion was important to him; it embodied his personal relationship

with Christ/God. However, the social context of that religion - “we-ligion” according to my encyclopedia - was a near-complete mystery to Peter (don't forget he was a hermit!) until he became Pope. No doubt he became aware of and frustrated by the numerous self-serving factions lobbying for advantage. No doubt he had a moment where he stepped back and thought “what does all this have to do with the love of Christ?” A return to Onofrio to love Christ the best way he knew how seemed the only acceptable course of action.

So if we look at Peter's decision from the point of view of his “we-ligion” - i.e., the catholic church – then yes, we would conclude his time as pope was a complete failure, a carnival of incompetence. However, viewed from the vantage point of Peter's “religion,” he made the best possible decision after weighing his Catholic Church against the catholic church. For him, and from his perspective, for us, the former is ultimately much more important than the latter.

However, if you still can't be satisfied without chastising anyone with being a coward or being completely devoid of character, what say you direct your ire towards Celestine's successor, Boniface VIII? How courageous was he, placing the man formerly known as Pope Celestine V under house-arrest and mistreating him to the point of death? Shouldn't Boniface VIII be the hopeless shade meandering about Hell for all eternity? That's where he is according to my encyclopedia.

Damien Rappuhn says

A fun and interesting story of a unique and interesting case in the medieval ages. Some of my favorite quotes include those to the effect of: "Will we ever see a pope abdicate in our lifetime? Probably not." (It was written around 2009/2010 after Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the tomb of Celestine V).

Trang says

It seems as if only 10 pages were truly about this Pope. If anything, this book confirms that organized religion and papacy are fraught with the same corruption and greediness as Washington DC and Moscow. Popes murdering popes for power...and one wonders why millions, if not billions, follow so blindly.
