



FRANCESCO *nel cuore di Mirandola* *tra la gente*

FRANCESCO *in the heart of Mirandola*
among the people



Realizzazione editoriale



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From Julius II to Francis

Nothing is easier than wasting rhetoric when talking about what a pope is or does. And it is not a risk that only reporters run, but which falls heavily also on historians. The fact is that the papacy still constitutes an extraordinary object of study, because its institutional dimension, embracing many centuries, is not enclosed in a static past, but is almost like an olive tree, sculpted by the sun, wind, and time, coming down to our times and offering direct evidence of its evolution.¹ We thus need to be very careful and avoid adopting the same criteria – those of the historian and those of the witness – to judge different events that are distant over time. And this not only and not so much to avoid the risk of inevitably giving a historiographic structure to mere emotions, but above all to avoid the dishonesty of bending facts and people to personal use and consumption, perhaps in a need to demonstrate the truthfulness of theorems or patterns of interpretation of history to which we are particularly attached. This was a well-meaning dishonesty widely practised also in ecclesiastical faculties, where for centuries a history of Christianity was taught that brooked no interruptions or contradiction, but which was conceived exactly as a statement of faith – immutable and consistent. In short, it would have taken little more to write that even Peter, the Galilean fisherman, was crowned pope at the Last Supper, while it is now established that it was only from the fourth century that the bishop of Rome began to enjoy an actual significance over the other heads of Christian churches.²

The starting data are, however, clear. First of all, there is the dimension of what every pope triggers in the person who meets him: a particularly strong emotional reaction, which in the believer is certainly determined by the awareness of the exceptional role that the bishop of Rome holds within the Christian community. There is then another kind of emotion, more typical of those who are aware of the temporal effects of the pope's spiritual power, who thus became a powerful figure among the powerful, a figure to be supported and made a fuss of, rather than opposed. The bishops of Rome were aware of this, and indeed the most acute were able to see the courtesy surrounding them in ironic terms; by following his election as pope with the name of Pius II, Enea Piccolomini wrote these famous words: "When I was Enea, nobody knew me. Now that I am Pius, everyone calls me uncle." What is rather curious is how, despite the self-perception and self-representation of the pope being so changed over the centuries, the devotion of Christians

¹ For an initial introduction to the plentiful literature on the subject, see Philippe Levillain, *Dizionario storico del papato*, 2 vol., (Milan: Bompiani, 1996) and *Enciclopedia dei Papi*, 3 vols. (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2000), <http://www.treccani.it>.

² See CARLO PAPINI, *Da vescovo di Roma a sovrano del mondo. L'irresistibile ascesa del papa romano al potere assoluto. Frammenti di storia del papato. Dalle origini al secolo VII* (Turin: Claudiana, 2009).

to him has remained intact and has indeed in some way been transfigured.³ In the eleventh century Boniface VIII, then in the midst of a crisis that saw the papacy clashing frontally with the power of the Emperor in an attempt to establish a supremacy, wrote in the famous *Dictatus Papae* that the pope was superior to all the bishops and could remove them or move them as he wished; that his decrees had a force of law superior to any council; that he could release subjects from their oath of fidelity to sovereigns; and that “all princes have to kiss the feet only of the Pope,” that “his title is unique in the world,” and that “nobody may judge him.”⁴ It was the word of the pope, in short – and not the Gospels – that constituted the founding rule of faith. It was therefore logical that common Christians would end up venerating the pope more as a reincarnation of Christ than as his vicar. And it is known that Catherine of Siena was accustomed to describe the pope as “the sweet Christ on earth.”⁵ Perhaps it was also a more intimate awareness of how this was a distortion, if not a mystification that led the pope’s ceremony masters, in the solemn liturgy of the pontiff’s coronation, to introduce the custom of interrupting the rite three times to ignite a little heap of straw in front of him to remind him that “sic transit gloria mundi.”⁶ But the reality of the facts made it clear how this gesture ended up sounding hypocritical and, even more importantly, substantially ineffective. The foundations were thus laid for an exaltation of the bishop of Rome, which made the period of the Church of the Apostles a very distant notion and which would, not coincidentally, become more and more a myth and a measure of comparison used by the exponents of the great and lesser heretical movements of the Middle Ages and later of the Protestant Reformation to assert that what the pope said and how he lived had nothing in common with what was narrated in the New Testament. But it is important to note how this mystification of the figure of the pope has come down virtually unaltered to the present day. During the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), an outraged Eastern bishop reported to bishops from around the world what was commonly taught in a text of catechism: “the Pope is God on earth [. . .] Jesus placed the Pope above the Prophets [. . .] above the Precursor [. . .] above the Angels [. . .] Jesus has placed the Pope at the very level of God.”⁷

To turn closer to the first “visit” – if such we may define it – of a pope to Mirandola, it should be clarified that what may seem outrageous for a twenty-first-century observer, whether a believer or not, must necessarily be seen in another way if one hopes to grasp what was happening in the dramatic and cold January of 1511. First of all, we must remember how the Church had serious suspicions concerning the family governing Mirandola,

³ See ROBERTO RUSCONI, *Habemus papam. Il papato da Pietro ai nostri giorni* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017).

⁴ See LUIS MARTÍNEZ FERRER and PIER LUIGI GUIDUCCI, eds., “Il «*Dictatus Papae*» del pontefice san Gregorio VII (1075 ca)”, in *Fontes. Documenti fondamentali di storia della Chiesa* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2005), 160.

⁵ See CATERINA DA SIENA, *Le lettere*, ed. Giuseppe Di Ciaccia, vol. 1 (Bologna: ESD, 1996), 15.

⁶ MARTINE BOITEUX, “Parcours rituels romains à l’époque moderne”, in *Cérémonial et rituel à Rome (XVIe-XIXe siècle)* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1997), 34.

⁷ See “Periodus prima, Pars IV: Congregationes generales XXXI-XXXVI” in *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, vol. I (Città del Vaticano: Typis polyglottis Vaticanis, 1971), 297, mentioned by ENZO BIANCHI, “Il servizio papale oggi”, *Servitium*, 6 (1974), 854.

in the wake of Giovanni Pico's Theses, which had been the subject of a formal condemnation by Pope Innocent VIII in 1487.⁸ The chronicles reveal the story of Pope Julius II who, although struck by a serious illness that had almost killed him, had wanted personally to coordinate the siege of the city, whose conquest was considered strategic for controlling the enemy – the Este family, allies of France. This was a pope who was accustomed to using disconcerting language and who allegedly exclaimed, at the outset of his expedition: "I'll soon see whether my balls are as big as the French king's!". This was a pope who wore armour and grew a beard that some people claimed make him look like a bear and others a hermit.⁹ A pope who, finally, on 20 January 1511 – when the fort of Mirandola had surrendered, since the gates had been walled in and the bridge knocked down – did not hesitate to climb a ladder to make his triumphal entry. All of this, in fact, perhaps somewhat surprised the contemporaries of the Della Rovere pope but did not scandalise them.¹⁰ Indeed, we must consider all the further evolution of a historical process that saw the pope as a real prince in dispute with other European sovereigns who were no longer intimidated by threats of excommunication or sanctions as they had been in the times of Henry IV at Canossa. Even before Pope Julius, wrote Guicciardini, the popes of Rome began to appear "rather more like secular princes than popes. Their concerns and endeavours began to be no longer the sanctity of life or the propagation of religion, no longer zeal and charity towards their neighbours, but armies and wars against Christians".¹¹ In referring to the pages of Ferdinand Gregorovius, Paolo Prodi has written in this regard that, having transformed itself into an Italian power, the papacy embarked on its most splendid era as secular-cum-ecclesiastic principality and its darkest years as Christian priesthood.¹²

Julius II, whose pugnacious nature was a secret to no one, became pope in 1503, at a time of serious doctrinal crises – Luther's ninety-five theses would be made public just fourteen years later – and political difficulties due to the constant erosion of the temporal power of the Church on the part of other crowns, in particular France and Venice. His programme was clear from the outset: to restore the glory of the Church, even before its power.¹³ This also deserves to be remembered: unlike many predecessors and successors, Julius II did not seek to ensure the affirmation and prestige of his own family. One of the most illustrious papal historians, Leopold von Ranke, wrote, in a passage that deserves to be quoted in full:

Other popes had sought to secure principalities for their children and nephews; Julius II put all his pride into expanding the state of the Church. He should be considered the founder of this. He found the entire territory of the state in the most complete

⁸ See GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, "Conclusiones nongentae", in Albano Biondi, ed., *Le novecento tesi dell'anno 1486*, Studi picchiani, vol. 1 (Florence: Olschki, 1995).

⁹ See ALESSANDRO PASTORE, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. LVII, s.v. "Giulio II, papa" (Rome: Treccani, 2001), <http://www.treccani.it>.

¹⁰ This issue was recently examined by MASSIMO ROSPOCHER, *Il papa guerriero. Giulio II nello spazio pubblico europeo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015).

¹¹ FRANCESCO GUICCIARDINI, *The History of Italy*, translated and edited by Sidney Alexander (New York: Macmillan, 1969), book IV, 149.

¹² See PAOLO PRODI, *Il sovrano pontefice. Un corpo e due anime: la monarchia papale nella prima età moderna* (1982; repr. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006), 43.

¹³ JOHN ARTHOS, *The Ambiguities of Pope Julius and his Rome*, in CHARLES TRINKAUS and HEIKO AUGUSTINUS OBERMAN, eds., *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion. Papers from the University of Michigan Conference* (Leiden: Brill 1974), 481–482.

confusion. [. . .] The world at that time considered the establishment of the Church's state to be a glorious and even religious undertaking. All the pope's moves were done with this one single aim: all his thoughts were animated by this idea, and indeed, I would say, were tempered by it. [. . .] He founded a power which no pope had ever had before. A beautiful territory obeyed him from Piacenza to Terracina. He had always wanted to appear as a liberator and he treated his new subjects mildly and with wisdom and received affection and devotion from them. The rest of the world did not see so many belligerent populations obeying a pope without fear. "Once there was no baron however minor that did not despise the papal power; now even the king of France respects it" said Machiavelli.¹⁴

Of course, there was no lack of criticism regarding the actions of Pope Julius. After his death, an anonymous satirical text entitled *Julius Excluded from Heaven* (a dialogue that can now be finally attributed to the great Erasmus of Rotterdam) began to circulate – it imagined a dialogue between the late Julius II knocking at the gates of paradise, and Saint Peter, who was reluctant to let him in, the reason being the difference in perspective on the role of the Church and its government.¹⁵ On the other hand, Cardinal Bellarmino claimed Pope Julius II's actions were wholly legitimate: "The pope is a prince like everyone else, and like everyone else he must retain his dominion over his lands even through the use of war, if necessary: Julius II must be praised for reconquering the lands of the Church and his action is consistent with the example of his predecessors."¹⁶ Even the contemporaries of Julius II, therefore, were unable to agree on his work. The people of Mirandola, in turn, have retained a very special memory of these events. Naturally, there was the natural sense of outrage for what had been done by a pope, but this feeling was also offset by the intense pride – typical of the inhabitants of a small town – for having been able to hold the great warrior pope at bay for three weeks. Only in this way can one understand the decision to hang Raffaello Tancredi's large painting – depicting the capitulation of the Mirandola fortress to the pope – in the hall of the town hall. In any case, there was a sense of something unfinished as when someone's death renders impossible a long-awaited clarification. We know that in 1988, when John Paul II's trip to Emilia–Romagna was announced, someone suggested the idea that the pope come also to Mirandola to heal this historical wound, but the Polish pope briefly stopped only in Carpi.

It was Pope Francis, elected bishop of Rome exactly five hundred years after the death of Julius II, who finally closed the circle. He entered Mirandola on the opposite side from which his predecessor had entered and the only wall he encountered was the mass of people who had waited for him for hours in the streets. He appeared in the same way as he appeared to the world after his election on 13 March 2013: with a simple white robe that, unlike that of his predecessors, does not even bear the papal coat of arms, the better to stress – like the time when he refused to attend a concert in

¹⁴ LEOPOLD VON RANKE, *Storia dei Papi* (Florence: Sansoni, 1965), 46–48.

¹⁵ ERASMO DA ROTTERDAM, *Giulio*, ed. Silvana Seidel Menchi (Turin: Einaudi, 2014).

¹⁶ PRODI, *Il sovrano pontefice*, 63–64.

his honour that had originally been planned for Benedict XVI – that he is not, or is no longer, a “Renaissance prince”.¹⁷ That is why, even without Pope Francis making the slightest mention of what had happened in 1511 or repeating yet another mea culpa for the misdeeds of some remote precursor, all the people of Mirandola realised that they were experiencing a historic moment. And not just for the event itself (even though it is obvious that when a pope comes to town, this is an exceptional happening) but above all because they have witnessed the complete overthrow of the image of the pope as embodied and defended by Julius II. Francis did not come to conquer but to console and encourage a community still suffering because of the earthquake of 2012; he did not look at Mirandola as a strategic stronghold, but as a place that in its small way reproduces the pains and hopes typical of big cities; he did not present himself as a dominator who imagines that the glory of the Church lies in the ostentation of its political power, but like the Apostle Peter, who claimed to possess neither gold nor silver, but only the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth. Here is what happened in Mirandola on 2 April 2017, that was truly historic: not the pope’s reconciliation with the town, but the papacy’s reconciliation with itself and with its most genuine mission.

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¹⁷ See ROBERTO MONTEFORTE, “La rivoluzione di Francesco, il papa del cambiamento”, *RES. Politica Società Cultura*, 9/10 (July 2013), 55.