

Good Pope, Bad Pope: Their Lives, Our Lessons

Mike Aquilina

Servant Books (Oct 1, 2013)

Softcover \$14.99 (144pp)

978-1-61636-628-5

A blend of quiet humor and an understanding of human infallibility illuminates the qualities of numerous popes' reigns.

Examining the lives of some of the lesser known and less admired popes, Mike Aquilina demonstrates that even a bad pope may be good if he serves the purpose of the Church.

Bold and enthusiastic and one of the most error prone, the disciple Peter was also impulsive and rash, so that Jesus sometimes chastised him. But what better character to jump-start Catholicism? According to Aquilina, Peter was the only leader of the Church to choose his successor. Peter selected Clement, who was his opposite, a rather scholarly, dry type who nevertheless had a sharp perspective on what this new thing known as Christianity was and could become.

Good Pope, Bad Pope shines the light of current understanding on bygone pontiffs, twelve of them, from the time of St. Peter (AD 32-67) to John Paul II (AD 1978-2005). It unashamedly seeks to find, for example, the good that came from the very bad pope Benedict IX, who is said to have been “a disgrace to the chair of Peter.” Aquilina suggests that Benedict was a “college age pope” who “turned his life into one big party.” But the author also claims that “by being the worst possible pope, [Benedict] gave the reformers the kick they needed.”

If putting a positive spin on some of these papal bios seems a bit strained, it's done with quiet humor, an appropriate amount of research, and a deft, almost lyrical writing style. Aquilina, the author or editor of more than forty books about Catholicism, is a well-known spokesperson for the Church. He tells these stories with verve and zeal, refurbishing the ancient past by passing it through a filter of modern catchphrases (he calls Attila the Hun a “holy terror”), yet all is done with respect. What this book accomplishes is neither to apologize for the humanly weak men who became popes nor to lavish unwarranted praise on their sometimes dubious accomplishments, but to identify a fitting rationale for their small part in the big scheme of things. It could be revelatory to those readers who feel uncomfortable with the notion of papal infallibility.

Aquilina has focused a microscope on an exclusive group of men who were called upon to be more than men. *Good Pope, Bad Pope* is fascinating reading, not just for the believer but also for the educated skeptic.

BARBARA BAMBERGER SCOTT (Winter 2014)

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