NOT BY FAITH ALONE: VITTORIA COLONNA, MICHELANGELO AND REGINALD POLE AND THE EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT IN SIXTEENTH CENTURY ITALY

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

Christopher Allan Dunn, J.D.

Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.
March 19, 2014
ABSTRACT

Beginning in the 1530’s, groups of scholars, poets, artists and Catholic Church prelates came together in Italy in a series of salons and group meetings to try to move themselves and the Church toward a concept of faith that was centered on the individual’s personal relationship to God and grounded in the gospels rather than upon Church tradition. The most prominent of these groups was known as the spirituali, or spiritual ones, and it included among its members some of the most renowned and celebrated people of the age. And yet, despite the fame, standing and unrivaled access to power of its members, the group failed utterly to achieve any of its goals. By 1560 all of the spirituali were either dead, in exile, or imprisoned by the Roman Inquisition, and their ideas had been completely repudiated by the Church. The question arises: how could such a “conspiracy of geniuses” have failed so abjectly?

To answer the question, this paper examines the careers of three of the spirituali’s most prominent members, Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo and Reginald Pole. Beginning with an examination of the precepts of the group’s guiding theologian, Juan de Valdés, I examine how each of these three individuals sought to advance Valdés’ precepts in their works. Valdesian tenets can be found in Vittoria Colonna’s poetry, Michelangelo’s late
paintings, and Reginald Pole’s books. All three sought, as well, to promote their ideas through salons and informal gatherings, and in Reginald Pole’s case, through his participation in the Council of Trent.

In analyzing why they failed, the paper applies the analytical framework established by Morton Deutsch in his book, *The Resolution of Conflict*. Deutsch divides conflicts into two types: “constructive” conflicts, in which all the participants achieve some or all of their goals, and “destructive” conflicts, in which only one side or neither achieves its goals. He identifies the characteristics of both the participants and the conflict itself which determine whether a conflict is likely to prove constructive or destructive.

Applying Deutsch’s framework to the efforts of Colonna, Michelangelo and Pole, I conclude that the spirituali failed for three reasons. First, their idiosyncratic, “artistic” personalities were such that they were incapable of reaching out to those who opposed their views, especially if their antagonists possessed more doctrinaire, bureaucratic or practical attitudes. Second, their aristocratic backgrounds impeded their ability to work with or gain support from those they viewed as less educated or cultured than they were. Finally, the very tenets of their philosophy – fundamentally based on a personal relationship with God – allowed them to recoil from conflict or even negotiation with those whose views differed from theirs, effectively withdrawing into their own personal circles and abandoning the struggle to promote their views.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION. THE SPIRITUALI AND THEIR GOALS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE. THE SPIRITUALI, THEIR BELIEFS AND THEIR ANTAGONISTS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO. VITTORIA COLONNA</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE. MICHELANGELO</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR. REGINALD POLE</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE. THE FAILURE OF THE SPIRITUALI</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SIX. THE END OF THE SPIRITUALI</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Plate 1. Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment* 53
Plate 2. Detail of Active Christ, from *The Last Judgment* 55
Plate 3. Detail of the Faithful Being Pulled Up, from *The Last Judgment* 57
Plate 4. Detail of Dismas Holding the Cross, from *The Last Judgment* 59
Plate 5. Michelangelo, *The Conversion of Saul* 63
Plate 6. Detail of Saul’s Face, from *The Conversion of Saul* 64
Plate 7. Michelangelo, *The Crucifixion of Peter* 67
Plate 8. Detail of St. Peter’s Face, from *The Crucifixion of Peter* 69
INTRODUCTION
THE SPIRITUALI AND THEIR GOALS

The 1530’s was a decade of political, religious, economic and cultural crisis in Italy. In 1527 the Emperor Charles V’s troops had brutally sacked Rome, despoiling or destroying many of its great palaces and churches. The Medici pope, Clement VII, had been imprisoned in the Castel’ St. Angelo and fled the city, recoiling in horror as much of the artistic treasure of Renaissance Rome was despoiled or sold to pay the Spanish soldiers who occupied the city. The sack of Rome came as a profound shock to the cultural and religious structure of Renaissance Italy, causing many of its most influential writers, thinkers and theologians to question their common humanist values. At the same time, the Church came under a siege of another kind in Northern Europe as Luther’s Reform movement prompted many of the northern states of the Holy Roman Empire to break from the Holy See. These departures were followed by Calvinist rebellions in Switzerland and Henry VIII’s removal of England from the Catholic fold. Many of the sources of revenue for the Renaissance Catholic Church disappeared, greatly reducing the sources of support for the artistic, literary and philosophical efforts of the Church.

Into this atmosphere of crisis stepped a group of aristocratic writers, poets, artists and churchmen who met together in a series of salons in Ischia, Rome, Naples and (eventually) Viterbo, Italy, to discuss literary, artistic and religious themes. Too loose a collection of disparate personalities to be called a “conspiracy” and too close-knit a group to be called a “movement,” they ultimately would come to be known by the name they called themselves: the “spirituali,” an Italian word meaning the spiritual ones. Together
they comprised undoubtedly the greatest collection of genius Italy had seen since Florence in the 1480’s and 1490’s; in many ways they can be considered the last blossom of the Italian Renaissance.

The *spirituali* would include among their participants some of the greatest thinkers, writers, poets, artists and theologians of the era. The participants in the meetings of the *spirituali* included the writers and poets Bernardo Tasso, Pietro Bembo and Marcantonio Flaminio. Vittoria Colonna, probably the most famous female poet in Italy, was an organizer and promoter of many of the *spirituali*’s efforts. From the cloth came several of the most influential prelates of the church, including Cardinal Gasparo Contarini, who would be tasked by the pope with seeking common ground with the Lutherans in a series of colloquies at Regensburg, Germany, in the early 1540’s; and Cardinal Giovanni Morone, also a participant at Regensburg. Bernardino Ochino, general of the Capuchin order, was an early participant, and at the time was probably the most electrifying (and popular) preacher in Italy. And there was Cardinal Reginald Pole, a cousin of Henry VIII who would break with Henry over Henry’s assumption of the leadership of the Church in England, and who became a papal legate at Viterbo and a delegate to the Council of Trent. Pole would eventually come within one vote of being elected pope. Not least among the group was Michelangelo, already the most recognized artistic “genius” in Italy and perhaps in all Europe.

What set the *spirituali* apart from other artistic or religious movements of the time was their unique combination of artistic genius and religious fervor: the poets and artists sought to use their work to promote the religious goals of the *spirituali*, even as the high-
ranking clergymen drew inspiration and solace from the artists in their efforts to change the church. While there were other literary and artistic “circles” and “evangelical” movements in Italy in the sixteenth century, none of these other groups united the artistic and religious efforts in such strength or at such a high level.

Although the talents, proclivities and goals of the members of the group differed widely – and many participants’ views evolved over time (sometimes radically) – the efforts of the spirituali can be said to have embraced two large themes. First, and perhaps most important, the group sought to promote the concept of “faith alone” as the means, if not the cause, of human spiritual “justification.” The spirituali tended to treat this concept not in the pure sense that Luther used it – with justification being independent of human good works – but rather in the sense of faith being the primary element in what is essentially a “personalistic” relationship between man and God. The primacy of faith was a common theme among the participants in the group, as can be seen in their poetry, art, sermons and letters.

Second, the spirituali sought to move the Church toward a position which, through its emphasis on faith as the dominant characteristic of man’s relationship to God, would produce reforms in the Church and so open it to the “evangelical” reform movements sweeping across Europe. In their fondest hopes, the spirituali even thought that a faith-based approach might make it possible to reach a rapprochement with the Lutherans in Northern Europe such that the overarching unity of the Catholic Church in Europe could be restored.
And yet, despite bringing together some of the finest minds Italy had to offer, the spirituali failed in all of their goals. The Regensburg Colloquy ended without any repair in the breach with the Lutherans, and the Council of Trent produced a declaration on justification that effectively repudiated all of the tenets of the spirituali. Vittoria Colonna died at an early age, broken in physical and spiritual health. Michelangelo ceased painting entirely, burying himself in architecture. Cardinal Pole was never elected pope and died in England after refusing a summons to return to Rome for possible trial before the Inquisition. Most of the other participants went into exile, left the Church entirely, or were silenced and even imprisoned by the Inquisition. The Church closed in upon itself, retreating into a rigid form of Catholicism that persisted until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960’s.

How was it possible for such a confederacy of geniuses to fail so abjectly? I propose to study this question by focusing upon the three most notable spirituali, Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo and Reginald Pole. I will examine their efforts, and their failures, using the criteria developed by Morton Deutsch, whose work The Resolution of Conflict1 provides several criteria for distinguishing “constructive conflicts,” which lead to positive changes that both sides can accept, from “destructive conflicts,” which lead to the destruction or collapse of one of the two sides. Although, like Tolstoy’s famous “unhappy families,” all failed movements fail in their own way, it is the thesis of this paper that Deutsch’s criteria allow us to identify three principal reasons for the failures of the spirituali. First, the personalities and culture of the spirituali prevented them from

---

establishing common ground with those in the Church who opposed their views, thereby escalating and personalizing the conflict in a way that did not permit them to move the Church toward their views. Second, the aristocratic backgrounds of the spirituali greatly constrained their ability to reach out to those whom they perceived as less cultured than they were. Third, the ideology of the spirituali – to the extent they can be said to have had an ideology – was itself one that led away from engagement and toward a contemplative withdrawal from any conflict, essentially leaving the field in the possession of their opponents.
CHAPTER ONE

THE SPIRITUALI, THEIR BELIEFS AND THEIR ANTAGONISTS

Who Were the Spirituali?

The loose-knit group known as the spirituali may be said to have had its beginnings in the 1520’s in the formation of literary salons, sometimes referred to as cenacoli, by women of the high Italian aristocracy. From 1509 until the mid-1530’s, the Duchess Costanza d’Avalos and her niece by marriage, Vittoria Colonna, hosted a series of literary salons in the d’Avalos’ “island fortress” of Ischia, just off the coast from Naples. The salons brought together “writers, artists, philosophers and the best society of the island” for discussion of the new literary works. While the focus of these salons was overwhelmingly literary (with a heavy emphasis on Petrarchan sonnets), its participants were also keenly interested in religious or “spiritual” themes as well.

This interest can be discerned most clearly in Vittoria Colonna, the Marchioness of Pescara, who departed Ischia in 1531 to move into the convent of San Silvestro in Capite in Rome. Forbidden by her brother (and even by the pope, Clement VII) from taking the veil, Colonna soon established the same kind of cenacolo in Rome that she and her aunt had presided over in Ischia. But the focus of Colonna’s Roman cenacolo, while including powerful literary and artistic figures, would be directed more toward spiritual

---

1 Vittoria Colonna was married in 1509 to Costanza’s nephew, Ferrante Francesco d’Avalos, the Marquis of Pescara and one of the great condottieri of sixteenth-century Italy. Diana Robin, *Publishing Women: Salons, the Presses, and the Counter-Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.

2 Ibid., 3.
concerns. Shortly after arriving in Rome, Vittoria Colonna appears to have met Juan de Valdés, a Spanish “converso” (convert to Catholicism) who had fled Spain under suspicion of heresy and who in lectures and writings had advanced the notion of personal salvation through a mystical, direct relationship between man and Christ. As will be seen, Valdés’ teachings would become the foundation of spirituali thought and activities until his works were declared heretical and banned by the Roman Inquisition in 1543.

Vittoria Colonna’s salons in Rome and Ischia would bring together almost all of the major figures of the spirituali, representing both clerical and artistic spheres. From the clerical side came Cardinal Reginald Pole, who would become her close friend and spiritual advisor, and as we shall see, the principal force for Church reform among the spirituali. Also present was Cardinal Giovanni Morone, a legate to the Council of Trent who would eventually be tried for heresy. Most dynamic of the participants, however, was Bernardino Ochino, general of the Capuchin friars and among the most popular preachers in Italy at the time. Ochino would become “the voice of Valdés” in the Italian evangelical movement, and later the cause of great disappointment and concern among the spirituali after he fled Italy to avoid prosecution for heresy.

The literary and artistic side of the spirituali would be represented in Rome by the poets and writers Pietro Bembo as well as Marcantonio Flaminio, one of the most renowned Petrarchan sonnetists of the time (perhaps after Colonna). The most famous artist of the group, however, was undoubtedly Michelangelo, who was “a constant source of wonderment” to both artists and art patrons throughout Italy at the time. According to one historian, Michelangelo’s fellow artists “were entirely under the spell of his original
and sovereign style, looked up to him and paid homage to his every judgment.”

Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna became particularly close, with Michelangelo frequently visiting her at the convent and exchanging drawings and sonnets with her.

Over the course of the 1530’s the focus of the spirituali would increasingly emphasize the religious elements of discussion over the artistic, becoming more and more centered around the teachings of Juan de Valdés. In 1535 Valdés moved to Naples, to be joined by many of the spirituali from Vittoria’s circle, including Flaminio and Ochino. Numerous churchmen later associated with the spirituali would also arrive in Naples, including Pietro Martire Vermigli (known in England as Peter Martyr), Pietro Carnesecchi and Giovan Tomasso Sanfelice. These clerics would become famous or notorious for their involvement in the reform movement of the Church; some would participate in the Council of Trent while others would either apostatize or be tried for heresy.

During the latter half of the 1530’s the spirituali would be joined by Cardinal Gasparo Contarini, probably the most influential proponent of Church reform on both an institutional and doctrinal basis during the period. Although there does not appear to be any direct evidence of his participation in the salons of Vittoria Colonna in Rome or Naples, Contarini was in Rome at the time of Colonna’s salon and his correspondence with her at the time is well documented. Contarini also became closely allied with Reginald Pole as part of their work together on the papal commission’s Plan for

---


Reforming the Church in 1537,\(^5\) leading to a friendship that would last until Contarini’s death in 1542. From 1535 to 1541 Contarini formed part of a “group of reform-minded men and women,” whose focus was on “the necessity of individual reform” and upon reform of the Church.\(^6\) Thus he can readily be counted as a member of the *spirituali*, one whom the others looked to as the “steersman” of the ship.\(^7\)

In 1542 locus of the *spirituali* shifted from Rome and Naples to Viterbo, a papal residence (“*patrimonium Petri*”) and town just north of Rome, when Cardinal Pole was made legate there.\(^8\) At Viterbo, Pole gathered around him numerous Church prelates to discuss the works of Valdés and other evangelical writers, including Lutheran and even Calvinist writers. While the chief focus of Pole’s Viterbo “circle” – known variously as the *ecclesia viturbiana* (or the *regno di Dio*\(^9\) -- was religious, Pole did not fail to include artists and intellectuals in the group. Marcantonio Flaminio was a regular participant, as was English scholar George Lily.\(^10\) Vittoria Colonna, who moved from her convent in Rome to an apartment in Viterbo so that she could participate regularly in the meetings of the circle, was a key member, and one of the few participants to have been active in all three circles – Ischia, Rome and Viterbo.

---

\(^5\) Ibid., 143. The official title of the Plan was the *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia*, presented to the Pope in March of 1537.


\(^7\) Ibid., 149.

\(^8\) Mayer, *Reginald Pole*, 113.

\(^9\) The terms *ecclesia viturbiana*, or “Church of Viterbo,” and *regno de Dio*, or “kingdom of God,” were terms later applied by some of the participants such as Pietro Carnesecchi.

There has been considerable debate among historians as to how cohesive a group the *spirituali* was, or even whether it could properly be considered a group. In his 1924 monumental work on *The History of the Popes*, the German historian Ludwig Pastor noted the existence of the *spirituali* (as they were called at the time) and declared them to be a loose collection of “moderationists,” who urged a conciliatory attitude toward the Protestants in Germany. The English historian Dermot Fenlon, in his 1972 work on Reginald Pole, treated the *spirituali* as a very cohesive group gathered together to promote a specific religious and spiritual program. More recently, secular scholarship has sought to downplay the cohesiveness of the group, noting the shifting nature of personal relationships among the *spirituali* as well as their ties to those who opposed them on religious issues. These historians question whether the *spirituali* can even be called a “movement” in the modern sense of the term, and prefer to see them as part of a larger, more diffuse movement of “evangelism” in Italy.

To be sure, both the “membership” of the *spirituali* and the locations of their meetings changed over time. Some participants attended meetings in Naples but not Rome, or in Rome but not Viterbo. Still, many of the people who participated were present in two or all three of the locations where the circles met. Most of those who attended remained in communication with one another through letters or exchanges of poetry and other gifts, as did Michelangelo and Colonna, Colonna and Pole, and Pole

---


12 See, for example, William V. Hudon, “Religion and Society in Early Modern Italy – Old Questions, New Insights,” *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 3 (June 1996): 794. Hudon cites both the Italian historian Massimo Firpo and the American Historian Elizabeth Gleason as emphasizing the personal ties among the participants in Church affairs, ties which cut across ideological differences.
Michelangelo. Thus, while the spirituali were not a formally organized group, a “movement,” or even a “party” in either the current or the contemporary sense, they did form a “group of spiritually minded persons,” with common cultural interests, backgrounds and goals. They were interested in reform of the Church and in their own spiritual growth both as artists and as churchmen. To understand the group, then, it is necessary to understand the beliefs that united them.

**What Did The Spirituali Believe?**

The spirituali did not issue a “manifesto” or constitution of beliefs and principles for any of their “cenacoli.” Moreover, given that the cenacoli themselves can best be described as salons or discussion groups, the focus of discussion of the groups naturally shifted from meeting to meeting and from place to place. The participants of the groups, too, changed frequently. The shifting participation by individual spirituali in the circles of Ischia, Rome and Viterbo – with some participating in Ischia but not Rome, others in Viterbo but not Rome or Ischia – meant that there was no single core membership whose beliefs can be taken as being the definitive expression of the group’s views. Finally, it appears that some of the views of the participants changed over time as the political and religious “atmosphere” in Italy changed.

And yet the views of the spirituali were not completely formless. The focus of all three circles was largely on the teachings of Juan de Valdés as expressed in his lectures, letters and writings. Bernardino Ochino, the fiery Capuchin preacher who attracted large

---

13 Gleason, *Gasparo Contarini: Venice, Rome and Reform*, 195. Gleason has argued that the spirituali would not have been considered a “party” within the Church by either members of the curia or by Pope Paul III.
crowds throughout Italy would, according to one historian, receive from Valdés “the outline and topic of the sermon” he would preach the next day. Valdés appears to have participated in Vittoria Colonna’s circles in Ischia and Rome, and his writings were a frequent focus of the discussions in Viterbo. There is no doubt that all of those who called themselves spirituali were greatly influenced by Valdés and his views. Hence, an examination of Valdés’ teachings in his writings provides probably the single clearest outline of the views of the spirituali as a group and as individuals.

Valdés’ teachings are expressed in a series of manuscripts that circulated among reform circles in Italy throughout the 1530’s. Included among these writings are the Alfabeto Cristiano16 and the Diálogo de Doctrina Cristiana, both of which were read and discussed among the spirituali. Other letters and manuscripts of Valdes circulated widely and were discussed by the spirituali in their various circles.

By far the most important expression of Valdés’ thought, however, is the Beneficio di Cristo Crucifisso, or Benefit of Christ Crucified.17 The authorship of the Beneficio has been the subject of some controversy. It was first published in 1542 (after Valdés’ death), but is widely believed to have circulated in manuscript form since at least 1538. Its authorship is commonly attributed now to Valdés and a Benedictine monk

---


16 The Alfabeto Cristiano, or Christian Alphabet, is a book of tenets organized around the letters of the alphabet. The Alfabeto is now available in both Italian and Spanish, whereas the Diálogo de Doctrina is available only in Spanish. See Nieto, Juan de Valdés, 339.

17 See note 18. In this paper, when referring to the work as it was written and circulated in Italy in the sixteenth century, I refer to it as the Beneficio. However, when quoting from the work, I cite to the recent English translation, which appears as the Benefit of Christ.
called Don Benedetto.\textsuperscript{18} However, the 1542 published edition has been said to have been edited and rewritten extensively by \textit{spirituale} Marcantonio Flaminio, and at least one historian attributes much of its contents to Reginald Pole.\textsuperscript{19} Because of the apparent collaboration of the \textit{spirituali} in the preparation and publication of the \textit{Beneficio}, and because the book crystallizes much of Valdés’ thinking, it provides a useful guide to the ideas that animated and motivated the \textit{spirituali} in their efforts at reform.

The starting point of Valdés’ thinking is the personal relationship between man and God. This relationship is created in the act of “justification,” a doctrine which some have claimed that Valdés “introduced into the Italian and Spanish worlds for the first time.”\textsuperscript{20} This is true, of course, only for the particular sense in which Valdés used the term, since the doctrine of justification had been argued and debated by theologians from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, and from Erasmus to Luther and Calvin. For Valdés, “justification” meant “the new state man has before God because of Christ’s death, on man’s behalf.”\textsuperscript{21} It is important to understand that this justification is not “conferred” by baptism or any other sacrament; it is conferred by Christ’s sacrifice alone. Men “who are called and drawn by God to the grace of the gospel make Christ’s righteousness their


\textsuperscript{19} Thomas Meyer, \textit{Reginald Pole: Prince and Prophet}, 120.

\textsuperscript{20} Houston, “Editor’s Note,” \textit{The Benefit of Christ}, xvii.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
own.”

Christ draws man to an act of faith, in other words, allowing man to “enter into Christ.”

The Valdesian concept of justification draws heavily on St. Paul’s epistles to the Romans and the Corinthians, as well as on later analyses by St. Augustine. It bears a close relationship as well to Martin Luther’s concept of “imputed justification,” that is, justification imputed by God alone. Most scholars agree, however, that Valdés arrived at his concept of justification independently of either Luther or Calvin. Valdés does not engage in any scholastic exegesis of the nature, causes or process of justification. For him justification is a mystical act of faith by which man “brings himself into conformity with Christ.” Valdés uses the phrase “justification by faith” numerous times in the Beneficio. Man is “called to God,” and his response to this call is what Valdés calls justification.

Whether Valdés’ concept of “justification by faith” is the same as Luther’s and Calvin’s concept of “sola fides,” or justification by faith alone, was unimportant to the spirituali at the time (although it would become important to some of them later). What is important to understand, however, is what Valdés’ doctrine of justification implies: if man is saved by his personal, faithful response to God’s grace, then much of the Catholic Church’s “economy of salvation” – that is, its insistence on the sacraments of confirmation, confession, and penance, as well as the concept of purgatory – becomes superfluous, if not completely irrelevant. Valdés in fact never mentions the sacrament of

---

22 Ibid., 4.

23 Ibid., 64.

24 Ibid., 58.
pentence once in his writings. Indeed, what he does say is that such rites tend toward human “self-justification,” something that the faithful Christian should steadfastly avoid. “Do not exercise yourself in anything effecting righteousness or in any kind of self-exerted religion,” he enjoins.  

Valdés’ insistence upon justification by faith thus puts him clearly on one side of the centuries’ old dispute in the Catholic Church between justification by faith and justification by works. For Valdés, good works follow naturally and inevitably from justification itself. Good works, he writes repeatedly, are like the fruit of the tree or the heat of a flame. It is impossible to have faith without good works ensuing from them. However, works are not a cause of or in any way necessary to salvation: “how foolish,” he writes, “are those who depend on their own self-righteousness and presume that they can make use of their works to save themselves.” He therefore insists that “faith makes men righteous without the help of works.”

It is also important to note, however, that while Valdés finds good works unnecessary to salvation, he does not call (as Calvin did) for the wholesale dismantling of the religious structure of the Catholic Church. On the contrary, Valdés discusses certain sacraments, particularly baptism and communion, as important parts of the Christian’s act of faith. For Valdés, such sacraments, along with frequent prayer and meditation, are “weapons” that allow the Christian to “remedy” any lack of assurance that he is justified.

25 Ibid., 35.
26 Ibid., 125.
27 Ibid., 132.
By the “visible sacrament” of communion, he writes, “our troubled consciences can be assured of our atonement with God.” Valdés recommends “prayer, the remembrance of holy baptism, the frequent use of the holy communion, and meditation upon the reality” of justification as regular acts of Christian piety.

Valdés’ teachings, therefore, place him close to Lutheranism and Calvinism on the doctrine of justification, but fall short of calling for the dismantling of the apparatus of the Catholic Church. Whether these teachings amount to a “middle way” or a logical dichotomy is not important. What is important is that for the spirituali, they meant a doctrine of a direct, personal relationship with God that still allowed for the observance of some Catholic sacramental practices – principally baptism and communion – and accepted the structure of the Church (while forming no opinion, apparently, on the precise religious functions performed by priests).

Given the fundamentally Valdesian orientation of the spirituali, the views of the spirituali toward the Protestant movements in Germany and Switzerland were considerably more benign than those of many in the papal curia. The spirituali attitude toward the Protestant Reformation can, indeed, be viewed as a second pillar of their thought. The spirituali agreed with the Protestants that the Church was in desperate need of moral, doctrinal and administrative reform. Their views on the individual’s path to salvation were not – at least in their own view – all that different from those of Luther and Calvin. While they allowed for some differences with Luther and Calvin, they did

---

28 Ibid., 145.
not see the Protestant groups as being inherently inimical or threatening to the Catholic Church, either as an institution or as an expression of core beliefs.

Thus, the spirituali believed, through much of their existence, that some sort of rapprochement was possible between the Catholic Church and the Protestants. In 1541, at Regensberg, Cardinal Contarini and Martin Bucer were able to reach agreement on an expression of the doctrine of justification that, as we will see, seemed to offer the hope of an eventual union of the Lutheran and Catholic positions. While the Regensburg formulation was soon rejected by both Luther and the papacy – and this can be characterized as the spirituali’s first great failure – even after that failure the spirituali sought to downplay the differences between the Protestant and Catholic positions on doctrinal issues. Particularly for Cardinal Pole, for whom the goal of the overall unity of the Church can be seen as a fundamental guiding principle, it was important that the Church adopt doctrinal positions that were more open to Protestant views, thereby leaving the door open for reconciliation at some later date.

In summary, while not denying the diversity of the spirituali views on issues of faith and institutional reform, it can be seen that the spirituali had three fundamental beliefs that animated their efforts throughout the existence of their “movement.” First, they believed that individual salvation was developed through faith, with faith seen as a direct, personal involvement with God (through Christ) that ultimately relies entirely upon God’s grace and does not depend upon the individual’s “good works.” Second, the

29 Cardinal Pole’s single greatest work was De unitate ecclesiae, “On the unity of the Church,” a book written in the form of a letter, which he addressed specifically to his cousin Henry VIII. Pole’s views as set forth in De unitate are explored in greater detail in Chapter Four. Joseph Dwyer, Pole’s Defense of the Unity of the Church (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1965).
spirituali generally accepted that the institution of the Church has a role to play, if a limited one, in allowing the individual to develop his faith, through baptism and communion. Third, by allowing that man’s road to salvation ultimately depends upon his personal direct relationship to God, the spirituali believed that the Church should remain sufficiently open in its doctrine to allow the Protestants to come back into some sort of amicable relationship with the Church, whether in the immediate or only in the distant future.

*Three for All: Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo and Reginald Pole*

Because the spirituali never developed either a fixed membership or a cohesive program, and because their membership was so diverse, it would be of little use to try to trace the efforts of all of their members to promote the goals of the spirituali. Instead, I focus on three of their members, Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo and Cardinal Pole. These three were undoubtedly the most illustrious members of the group (the word “famous” may also be apt, but it is somewhat anachronistic to apply it to the 16th century). They may also be considered the most accomplished: the use of the word “genius” was applied regularly to Michelangelo, and by Italian literati to Vittoria Colonna, even during their lifetimes. Cardinal Pole -- though less illustrious in a general sense than either Michelangelo or Colonna -- nevertheless was the critical member of the spirituali for purposes of forwarding the group’s goals within the Church.

The three appear to have had close relationships with one another, and these relationships formed a central characteristic of the way the spirituali developed and worked to effect their goals. It was Vittoria Colonna who first organized the salons that
brought together Michelangelo and Pole, and others; it was her salons that emphasized the thought and work of Valdés. Michelangelo developed a close personal connection to Colonna and through her, to Pole. And Pole carried on the efforts of Colonna’s circle with his own circle in Viterbo, in the process serving as her personal spiritual advisor. The three communicated with each other directly as well as within the various circles, and regularly provided one another with emotional and spiritual support.

It is appropriate, therefore, to analyze the *spirituali* movement through the lives and work of these three “geniuses.” Each of them brought his or her own separate “gifts” to the work of the *spirituali*, and each of them succeeded, or failed, in his or her own way. The success and ultimately the failure of the *spirituali* ultimately depended on the success or failure of Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo, and Cardinal Pole.
CHAPTER TWO
VITTORIA COLONNA

Vittoria Colonna was born into one of the most illustrious families in Italy. The
Colonna, into whose household Vittoria arrived in 1490,¹ were one of the two great noble
families of Rome. (The other were the Orsini). By the time Vittoria was born the
Colonna had given the church numerous cardinals and one pope, Martin V.² For
centuries the Colonna had been intimately involved in the factional struggles for power
and influence among the patchwork of city-states extending along the Italian peninsula
from Naples to Venice, now siding with one faction and now with another. The peculiar
mixture of pride, ambition and devotion to the Catholic faith that characterized Italian
aristocratic clans was virtually a part of Vittoria’s DNA as well as of her culture. It would
color her attitudes and actions throughout her life.

Vittoria was married at the age of 19 to Francesco Ferrante D’Avalos, to whom
she had been betrothed since the age of 5. In keeping with Italian aristocratic tradition,
the marriage was arranged for dynastic reasons, a union of the Colonna and D’Avalos
clans. The D’Avalos originally came from Aragon and had extensive landholdings in the
Aragonese kingdom of Naples, but after the French under Charles VIII sacked Naples in
1501, the D’Avalos retreated to their fortress in Ischia, a small island just off the city of

¹ There is some question as to whether she was born in 1490 or 1492. The majority of scholars,
however, place her birth in 1490. Abigail Brundin, Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian

² It was Martin V who in 1420 effectively ended the “Great Schism” in the church by returning the
papacy to Rome. The choice of a member of the pre-eminent Roman noble family by the Council of
Constance in 1417 was part of a deliberate attempt to return the papacy to Italian, and particularly Roman,
control.
Naples. In addition, a branch of the D’Avalos family held the marquisate of Pescara, a town on the Adriatic north of Rome. Francesco, the Marquis (“Marchese”) of Pescara, would become one of the most renowned and successful condottieri in sixteenth-century Italy. Vittoria’s marriage to Francesco D’Avalos in 1509 thus gave her both prestige and wealth to fortify her already lofty aristocratic status.

The Ischia Cenacoli

More importantly for the spirituali, Vittoria’s entry into the D’Avalos clan brought her into close contact with the redoubtable Duchess Costanza D’Avalos, Francesco’s aunt and, after the Duke’s death, the de facto head of the clan. In addition to actually leading troops into battle, the Duchess D’Avalos created a cenacolo, or literary salon, on Ischia that brought together some of the most prominent poets and writers in Italy. Following her marriage, Vittoria would join in these salons and begin to promote some of her own, so that, together and separately, the D’Avalos-Colonna cenacoli would meet almost constantly from 1510 through the mid 1530’s.

It was in the Ischia cenacoli that Vittoria would come into contact with the leading literary lights of sixteenth century Italy. Here she met the Neapolitan poets Jacopo Sanazzaro and il Cariteo (Benedetto Gareth), as well as the better known Paolo

---


4 Interestingly, Vittoria’s maternal grandfather was the condottiere Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino. The Duchy of Urbino was famous throughout Italy for the brilliant court held by Federico and his wife, Battista Sforza, whose portraits by Piero della Francesca are among the most visited in the Uffizi gallery in Florence. Vittoria’s marriage to Francesco D’Avalos, in uniting a highly cultured woman with a famous captain, can be seen as a curious echo of the Montefeltro-Sforza union.

Giovio and Bernardo Tasso. Tasso would later write a eulogy to Vittoria’s husband which would include an extensive portrait of Vittoria. He described her as “Vittoria gentil, specchio d’amore/Eccelsa Donna, specchio di virtude.” The connections to Italian literary society that Vittoria formed in Ischia would contribute greatly to her literary career and reputation. Paolo Giovio would publish an extensive letter describing the Ischia *cenacolo* as “a utopia” where artists and philosophers could share their interests in tranquil isolation from the wars that raged around them.

Vittoria Colonna’s own literary efforts also began in Ischia. Her earliest existing poem dates from 1512, an “epistola” addressed to her husband and her father, both of whom had been imprisoned by the French following the defeat of the papal forces by the French after the battle of Ravenna. In the poem, Vittoria longs for the presence of the two male influences in her life:

\[
\text{Del padre la pietà, di te l’amore,} \\
\text{Come doi angui rabidi affamati} \\
\text{Rodendo stavan sempre nel core}^{10}
\]

---

6 Bernardo’s son was Torquato Tasso who is among the most famous Italian poets and is the subject of both an opera by Donizetti and a play by Goethe.

7 Robin, *Publishing Women: Salons, the Presses, and the counter-Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, 8-9. I translate the line as “Gentle [or kind] Vittoria, mirror of love/Excellent lady, mirror of virtue.”


9 Vittoria’s father, Fabrizio Colonna, had switched sides from the French to the forces of Fernando el Catolico, the Aragonese king of Naples (and husband of Isabel of Castille) following the French destruction of Colonna landholdings near Rome. Robin, 2; Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian Reformation*, 20. Vittoria’s husband Francesco left Ischia in 1512 to lead a troup of cavalry on behalf of Fernando in Ravenna, as part of the war of the league of Cambrai. Francesco D’Avalos would go on become the commander in chief of Charles V’s Imperial forces in Italy. Frederick L. Taylor, *The Art of War in Italy, 1494-1529* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 23-28.

That is –

For my father mercy, for you love,
Like two rabid famished eels
That were always consuming my heart

The poem’s theme of longing for distant love falls well within the conventions of Italian Petrarchan poetry. At length, it follows Petrarchan conventions in its allusion to classical and early Italian sources. It has been called Vittoria’s “letter of introduction” to Neapolitan society.

The Rome Cenacolo

In 1525, Vittoria’s husband Francesco D’Avalos was killed leading the forces of Emperor Charles V at the battle of Pavia. For Vittoria, her husband’s death marked a major turning point in her life and art. She “immediately retreated” to the convent of San Silvestro in Capite in Rome, where she largely took up residence although continuing to travel back to Ischia and holding cenacoli with Costanza D’Avalos until about 1531.

---

11 My translation. The Italian word “pietà” can be translated as pity, but has a broader meaning that encompasses mercy or charity. The word “rodendo” literally means consuming. Brundin translates it as “gnawing,” which may better capture the poetic sense of the verse. Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian Reformation*, 21.

12 Ibid.

13 The battle of Pavia in 1525 effectively ended French influence in Italy and would ultimately lead to the sack of Rome by Charles V’s soldiers in 1527.


Although specifically forbidden by her brother and by Pope Clement VII to take the veil—they had hopes of marrying her to another noble family—Vittoria assumed the life of a “secular nun” at the convent, using its quiet to write poetry and its halls to host salons of her own.

She began to develop the persona of the pious, grieving widow whose thoughts are exclusively directed toward her dead husband. It is a theme she would return to and refine in most of her early poems, in the context of Petrarchan longing for the unattainable love. Her early poems, in fact, virtually copied parts of Petrarchan and Virgilian poems, as has been demonstrated conclusively by the principal scholastic study of her early literary efforts. Although she has been derided for her “slavish imitation” of the classical forms in these poems, even her harshest critic acknowledges that “there abides in her [Petrarchan poems] a sensitivity that carries one to another plane.”

It is undoubtedly due to the power of this poetic sensitivity that from 1525 onward, Vittoria’s literary reputation grew considerably. Her poems began to circulate in manuscript “to an audience far beyond Naples,” particularly among the leading literary figures of Italian society. Thus, she was cited by Ludovico Ariosto in his 1532 edition of

---


17 In using the word “persona” I am not suggesting that it is a false image. On the contrary, the depth and emotional power of the “lost love” shines through her sonnets, indicating that her grief was quite authentic.


19 Ibid., 196: “… il subsiste en elle une sensibilité qui se transpose sur un autre plan.” Therault uses the term “imitation servile” to describe Vittoria’s conventionality of form, a term that I have translated as “slavish imitation.”

Orlando Furioso as “the finest example…of poetic style in a woman writer.” 21 It is around this time that Castiglione gave her a draft of his Il Cortegiano to review and comment upon before it went to press. 22

And in 1530 Pietro Bembo, “the godfather of Petrarchism in sixteenth-century Italy,”23 contacted her in a letter sent through Paolo Giovio, beginning an exchange of correspondence that would continue for years. It appears that Bembo actively sought to promote her reputation as a poet in the finest Petrarchan traditions. In the 1535 edition of his Rime (poems), he describes the “Alta Colonna”24 in these terms: “leggiadra membra, avolte in nero panno, e pensier santi e ragionar celeste.”25 It is a striking mixture of Petrarchan ideal beauty and neo-Platonic spirituality. At least in Italian literary circles, Vittoria had achieved the highest possible rank.

Beginning around 1530, as well, Vittoria began to establish her own cenacolo in San Silvestro. This new salon, however, would prove to be broader in scope than the Colonna-D’Avalos cenacolo on Ischia. In particular, it would increasingly attract notable Italian clerics, reflecting Vittoria’s intensified spiritual focus, as religious study became a significant element of both her life and poetry. Participants in Vittoria’s Rome circle

---

21 Ibid., 25.


24 Literally, the “high Colonna,” which in Italian contains a pun as the “high column” as well as the high Colonna.

would eventually include virtually all of the clerical *spirituali*, including (eventually) Cardinals Gasparo Contarini, Giovanni Morone and Reginald Pole,26 all of whom would play major roles in the attempts to move the church toward a position consonant with the *spirituali* views.

The focus of the religious interest in Vittoria’s circle, however, was undoubtedly Juan de Valdés. Valdés arrived in Rome in 1532 from Spain, where he had been under some suspicion by the Inquisition. He became a member of the Papal court under Clement VII (the second Medici pope), although his precise position at the court is not known. It is known, however, that Valdés was a frequent participant in Vittoria’s Rome *cenacolo* from 1532 until 1535, when he left Rome to become archivist of the city of Naples.27 Under Valdés’ influence, the circle began to study St. Paul’s epistles to the Romans and Corinthians, as well as certain works of Protestant writers including Luther and Melanchthon. It is from Vittoria’s Rome *cenacolo* in the 1530’s that the term *spirituali* can first properly be used to describe the interests and activities of the group’s members.

*Bernardino Ochino and the Capuchins*

At the same time that Vittoria was focusing her Rome *cenacolo* on spiritual issues she became intimately involved with the fate of the Capuchins, a rigorous reform group that had separated from the already strict Observants, within the larger Franciscan

---


This involvement is not coincidental. The General of the Capuchins was Bernardino Ochino, a fiery preacher whose sermons would attract thousands, in both the north (Ferrara and Lucca) and south (in Naples) of Italy. Ochino was particularly close to Valdés, and it has been said that he would receive notes from Valdés on the night before his sermons, which he would faithfully use in his delivery. It is likely that Valdés introduced Vittoria to Ochino in Rome.

It appears that both Valdés and Ochino attended the meetings of Vittoria’s cenacolo in San Silvestro in Rome. It was with Ochino, however, that she formed a deep and personal connection. In 1534 Ochino’s sermons were attracting such crowds “that the churches would not hold” them. Often “most of the college of Cardinals” would be present at these sermons. Fearing a threat to papal authority, Pope Clement VII expelled Ochino and the entire Capuchin order from Rome. Vittoria reacted promptly and vigorously, engaging in a sustained letter-writing campaign together with her friend Catherina Cibò, to force the Pope to relent. She wrote long letters on behalf of the Capuchins to Cardinal Contarini and Ercole Gonzaga, as well as to the Pope himself. In

---

28 There are currently three groups within the Order of the Friars Minor (Franciscans): the oldest is the Conventuals, which was started by St. Francis himself. The Observants were a breakaway from the Conventuals, whom the Observants found to be too lax. The Capuchins were formed in the early sixteenth century by two Observant friars who found the Observants to be too lax.

29 Nieto, *Juan de Valdes and the Origins of the Spanish and Italian Reformation*, 47.


32 Caterina Cibò was Vittoria’s sister in law, and a great proponent of both Valdés and Ochino. She held her own literary cenacolo in Florence. Robin, *Publishing Women: Salons, the Presses, and the counter-Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, 185.
one of the letters she asked Gonzaga to intercede in favor of “these reverend fathers of
the holy and true life of St. Francis.” Her personal intervention seems to have been
instrumental in causing the Pope, with his aristocratic and profoundly humanist
background, to yield, reinstituting the Capuchins and allowing them and their General to
return to Rome.34

From this point onward Vittoria’s fate was irrevocably tied to Ochino. After 1534
Ochino began to preach increasingly in the north of Italy, and Vittoria decided to follow
him there. In 1537 she went with him to Ferrara, where he was preaching in the
cathedral, and from there she went with him to Lucca. Later Ochino would move to
Venice, where he seems to have preferred to be based,35 and Vittoria would visit him
there too.

Through her travels with Ochino in the north, Vittoria came into contact with
“evangelical” or “reform” circles beyond those of herself and her family in Ischia and
Rome. The presiding Bishop of Lucca, for example was Pietro Martire Vermigli,36 who
held a religious reform cenacolo of his own, one that would develop into something of a
hotbed of reform – and to some, heretical – activity. Thus Vittoria was exposed to 37

---

33 My translation of the French translation of an Italian letter quoted by Therault: “ces reverends
pères de la sainte et vraie vie de St. François.” Therault, Un Cénacle Humaniste de la Renaissance Autour
de Vittoria Colonna Châtelaine d’Ischia, 384.

34 Church, The Italian Reformers, 56.

35 Ibid., 57.

36 Pietro Martire Vermigli would later flee to Switzerland, eventually becoming well known in
English Protestant circles as “Peter Martyr.” I use the name Peter Martyr to refer to Pietro Martire
Vermigli in this paper, but note that Peter Martyr Vermigli is not to be confused with Peter Martyr of
Verona, a 13th century Dominican friar who was canonized as a saint.

37 Church, The Italian Reformers, 56.
groups whose primary activity was religious discussion – particularly on Valdesian lines – establishing religious inquiry as at least an important a focus as poetic or literary concerns. Vittoria’s reputation as an energetic and influential proponent of Italian Evangelism would come to equal, and for some, to supplant, her renown as a poet of the highest rank.

**Publishing Activity**

During the period between 1534 and 1542, even as she became immersed in the efforts of evangelical reform in Italy, Vittoria Colonna began to publish some of her poems. The first volume of her poetry, *Rime*, was published in 1538. The work would go through some twelve editions before her death in 1547. Although the first edition was essentially limited to Petrarchan sonnets centered on her longing for the love of her dead husband, they soon began to take on a more spiritual tone. In 1539, with the publication of the fourth edition, Vittoria included sixteen new “spiritual poems” ("rime spirituali") devoted specifically to her religious concerns. As the editions progressed they contained additional spiritual poems while the original number of non-religious poems remained unchanged. In the currently-available edition of Vittoria’s complete *Rime*, edited and published by Allan Bullock, there are more spiritual poems than not.

The publication of Vittoria’s poems was a source of considerable conflict to her. It has been said that she “would never consent to the publication of her poems.”

---


40 Maud Jerrold, *Vittoria Colonna, With Some Account of Her Friends and Times*, 70.
refusal is somewhat puzzling, given the number of editions of her poems that were actually published in her lifetime. She seems to have been much more comfortable with circulating her poetry privately, among her friends and correspondents; she complained at one point that her work had been pirated frequently in publication. However, there is at least some reason to believe that her protestations against publication were part of a carefully-constructed persona, that of the reluctant artist.41 This persona undoubtedly contributed to her reputation in both literary and religious circles in Italy.

_Spiritual Poems_

Given her increasing concentration on spiritual matters in both her life and poetry from 1535 to 1540, it is instructive to see how Vittoria uses her poetry to express her religious beliefs. Although almost any one of Vittoria’s spiritual poems can be chosen as an expression of her increased spirituality, I have chosen this one:

Quando dal Lume, il cui vivo spendore
Rend’l petto fidel lieto e sicuro,
Si dissolve per grazia il ghiaccio duro
Che sovente si gela intorno’l cuore
Sento ai bei lampi del possarto ardore
Cader de le mie colpe il manto oscuro
E vestirme in quel punto il chiaro e puro
De la prima innocenzia e primo amore;
E se bem com secreta e fida chiave
Serro quel raddio egli è schivo e sottile
Si ch’un basso pensier lo scaccia e sdegna
Ond’eí ratto se’ém vola; io mesta e grave
Rimagno, e pregol che d’ogni omba vile

---

41 Brundin, _Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian Reformation_, 2. Brundin states that she displayed “great skill at manipulating and disseminating the ‘correct’ public image that would aid, rather than hinder, her literary aspirations…”
Mi spogli, acciò più presto a me s’em vegna\textsuperscript{42}

The rhyme scheme is of course neatly Petrarchan, consisting of 8 lines ending ABBAABBA, followed by six lines ending CDECDE. But only reading it aloud in Italian can convey a feeling of the hypnotic beauty of its rhythms.

The meaning of the poem, stretched into the rhythms of the sonnet, is compelling.

I have translated the sonnet here:

When from the Lamp, whose living splendor
Makes the faithful heart joyful and secure,
Grace dissolves the hard ice
That often freezes the heart whole
I feel in the beautiful rays of that powerful heat
The dark mantle of my sins fall away
And clothe myself at that moment in the clarity and purity
Of the first innocence and first love;
And even if with the secret and faithful key
I lock that ray within, it is so shy and subtle
That one low thought expels and disdains it
So that it quickly flies; I, gloomy and sad
Remain, and I pray that of all vile shadows
I shall be divested, so that it more quickly can return to me

Rather than attempt to preserve any of the sonnet’s Petrarchan rhythms (an attempt bound to fail), I have resorted to a literal translation in order to convey its meaning. It is striking how directly Vittoria incorporates Valdesian thought into the sonnet. The poem begins immediately with the Lamp of God, whose grace “dissolves the ice” of the human heart. Grace proceeds directly and freely from God’s “first love”; it is not earned or sought. Her “faith” provides the key to lock God’s grace within, but it is incapable of doing so

\textsuperscript{42} Vittoria Colonna, \textit{Rime}, 89
with any permanence. The human mind is so weak that it can crush God’s grace with a
single “low thought” (“un basso pensier”), leaving the person sad and alone. The only
remedy is contemplative prayer, to drive away the “vile shadows” and preserve the hope
that God’s grace will return.

The poem thus reflects the Valdesian view that grace comes from God alone and
provides the only way to melt the ice of the human heart. Only by faith can we hope to
preserve the warmth of God’s grace, but this faith must be renewed through constant
prayer or God’s grace will be “expelled.” Above all, the relationship between the faithful
individual and God is direct and personal: the poet receives God’s light directly and
strives to retain it through prayer and contemplation.

In this and the other spiritual poems, Vittoria Colonna brought her art directly to
the service of the Valdesian religious tenets. Her poetic voice comes through clearly, but
not overtly, in her use of the first person,43 and her word choices are subtle and rhythmic.
But the poem is all about her relationship with the divine “Light.” Vittoria believed, like
Dante and others before her, that poetry should be used above all else to advance the
sacred. Yet, given her increasing absorption in the Italian Evangelical movements during
the late 1530’s, Vittoria’s focus on spiritual issues in her poetry may be less deliberately
poetic than an expression of her deepest self – spiritual concerns had become her life, and
naturally had to be expressed in her poetry.

Vittoria Colonna and Michelangelo

43 In Italian this can be accomplished without the use of the personal pronoun. Thus “I feel” is
“sento.” Colonna’s use of the vernacular allows her to express her own voice without emphasizing her own
person, as would be required in English.
As her focus was becoming more spiritual, sometime in either 1536 or 1538 44 Vittoria met Michelangelo, assuredly the most famous artist in Italy at the time. Though he was some fifteen years her senior, Vittoria and Michelangelo quickly attained a deep intellectual and spiritual intimacy, each exerting an energizing influence on the other’s life and art. A portrait of their relationship can be seen in a remarkable book, *Dialogues With Michelangelo*, written in 1548 by the Portuguese portraitist Francisco de Holanda.45 In the *Dialogues*, Vittoria and Michelangelo engage in a spirited discussion concerning the roles of art and artists in Italy as well as in Flanders and Portugal. While the accuracy of the book has been subject to considerable doubt, what rings true in de Holanda’s work is the easy familiarity that the two poets enjoy in each other’s company. Vittoria sends a servant to ask Michelangelo to join her at the convent of San Silvestro as soon as possible, and he arrives in short order. Upon arrival, Michelangelo purports not even to see de Holanda, “for I had only the Marchioness before my eyes.” 46

The relationship between the two grew steadily until Vittoria’s death in 1547. They had much in common. Both possessed an “aristocratic” background, although Vittoria was borne to a much higher aristocratic status than Michelangelo could ever hope to achieve. Both tended to be preoccupied, even tormented, by religious issues. Both saw the highest role of art as serving a religious purpose. Vittoria urged

---

44 There is some dispute among scholars as to whether Vittoria first met Michelangelo in 1536 or 1538. Brundin, 28 n. 46. On the basis of de Holanda’s book, which purports to relate events taking place in 1538, I would opt for the earlier date, since the relationship he recounts between Michelangelo and Vittoria appears well-established and intimate by 1538. Francisco de Holanda, *Dialogues with Michelangelo* (London: Pallas Athene, 2006).


46 De Holanda, *Dialogues with Michelangelo*, 38.
Michelangelo to express the Valdesian precepts of the *spirituali* in his art. Michelangelo, for his part, seems to have looked to her not only as a spiritual advisor but also as something of an embodiment of Petrarch’s Laura, an image of unattainable love that Michelangelo incorporates into his own sonnets.

The two engaged in a long-term exchange of gifts of art and poetry. Michelangelo sent two powerful drawings to her, one of Christ crucified and one of a pietà. Both have drawn considerable commentary, from then until now.47 He also sent her numerous sonnets, some of which are considered his best poetry. She, for her part, sent him a volume of “spiritual” sonnets in 1540 for his use alone, which he would not release for publication until some years after her death.48

The private sonnets that Vittoria sent Michelangelo reflect an even clearer expression of the views of the *spirituali* than that which surfaces from the spiritual poems in her published *Rime*. The opening sonnet of her manuscript to Michelangelo both “introduces” herself as a poet and sets forth her need to establish a direct relationship with Christ:

```
Since my chaste lover for many years
Kept my soul aflame with the desire for fame, and it nourished
A serpent in my breast so that now my heart languishes
In pain turned towards God, who alone can help me,
Let the holy nails from now on be my quills,
And the precious blood my pure ink,
```

---


My lined paper the sacred lifeless body,
So that I might write down for others all that he suffered.
It is not right here to invoke Parnassus or Delos,
For I aspire to cross other waters, to ascend
Other mountains that human feet cannot climb unaided.
I pray to the sun, which lights up the earth and the
Heavens, that letting forth his shining spring
He pours down on me a draught equal to my great thirst.49

Thus Vittoria recognizes that seeking fame as a poet was a misplaced desire, and
must be replaced by directing her efforts “to ascend other mountains” that can only be
reached by God’s grace.

The act of exchanging poems and drawings between Vittoria and Michelangelo
was itself an expression of the Valdesian ideas of the spirituali. Indeed, the very word
“exchange” is wrong in this context. Vittoria would send Michelangelo her poems, and
Michelangelo would send her his drawings and poems as pure and unsolicited gifts, with
no desire or expectation of receiving anything in return. The “gift-giving” was
deliberate, intended specifically as an echo of the “gift” of God’s grace to man. Just as
God’s grace could not be sought or “earned” in any way, the gift was not to be earned by
any type of contractual exchange of benefits. 50 As Valdés stated in the Beneficio de
Cristo, “those who depend only on God’s righteousness . . . will make no bargains with

49 Translated by Brundin, Vittoria Colonna, Sonnets for Michelangelo, 57.

50 In a letter to Vittoria, Michelangelo states that his first impulse upon receiving a gift of poems
from her was to make something to give her in return. He recognized, however, “that to introduce a gift
into an economy of exchange violates the very principle of the gift,” which, like the gift of God’s grace,
“cannot be bought.” The gift must be willingly accepted, without thought of trying to return the favor.
Quoted in Nagel, “Gifts for Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna,” The Art Bulletin 79 (December 1997),
650.
God about their works.” 51 The correspondence between Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna, and later with Reginald Pole, actually discusses the importance of understanding both the act of giving and the act of receiving as acts of religious significance. As one of Pole’s letters to Vittoria makes clear, “the only appropriate reaction to a divinely inspired, spiritual gift is an attitude of meek submission and grateful acceptance.” 52

Vittoria and Michelangelo also used their poems, art and letters to engage in a dialogue on the role of art in expressing their spiritual ideas. Vittoria commented repeatedly on the relative importance of “disegno,” or design, and “colore,” meaning color or finish, in art and poetry, in the drawings that Michelangelo has given her. In her own poems she raised these issues thematically. For both Michelangelo and Vittoria, “disegno” represented intellectual understanding and appreciation, while “colore” represented direct, emotional attachment.

One scholar who has done an extensive analysis of the exchange of letters and gifts finds a “deep ambivalence” in both Vittoria and Michelangelo toward the question of which of the two elements, disegno or colore (and hence intellect or emotion), is more important. 53 Both Vittoria’s and Michelangelo’s poems seem to take both sides of the argument, “often in the same poem.” 54 As we will see in greater detail in discussing

51 Valdés, The Benefit of Christ, 133.
52 Brundin, Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Politics of the Italian Reformation, 72 (paraphrasing a letter from Reginald Pole to Vittoria Colonna).
54 Ibid., 100.
Michelangelo, the relationship between Vittoria and Michelangelo is in a sense emblematic of the conflict within the spirituali between their coming together as a group of highly-educated intellectuals, steeped in both Classical (Platonic) and Christian writings, and the need for a direct and personal relationship to Christ as urged in the Beneficio di Cristo. Both Vittoria and Michelangelo were highly conflicted personalities, living a constant tension between their goals as artists and writers and their personal spiritual needs.

Vittoria Colonna and Reginald Pole

Vittoria’s energy as a member of the spirituali may be said to have revolved around three men, Bernardino Ochino and Michelangelo, previously discussed, and Reginald Pole. Pole entered Vittoria’s life around 1530 and joined in her salons in Ischia and Rome. At the time he was primarily interested in literary ventures, being a close friend of both Pietro Bembo and Marcantonio Flaminio, whose Latin poems he greatly admired. Pole was, however, also a deeply religious man, having known both Thomas More and Erasmus, and being strongly influenced by their attempt to bring a humanist approach to religious study. His interests thus perfectly coincided with those of Vittoria’s circles.

Vittoria’s relationship with Pole seems to have taken a dramatic turn some eleven years later when, in May of 1541, Henry VIII had Pole’s mother executed, partly out of anger at Pole’s refusal to attend the king’s summons to return to England. Pole, grieving deeply, looked to Vittoria for solace, asking her to “take the place of his dead mother and
to accept him as her son.”  Though she was only ten years older than Pole, Vittoria seems to have responded enthusiastically to Pole’s invitation. Vittoria had seen Pole as something of a Christ-like figure, so that assuming the role of his surrogate mother would allow her to treat the relationship as a metaphor for the relationship between Mary and Jesus.

In September of 1541, after Pole had been appointed papal legate to Viterbo, Vittoria moved to accompany him there, installing herself in the Convent of Saint Catherine. She became a regular member – and the only female member – of the group of church prelates and writers who composed the circle. During this time, Vittoria and Pole were “constantly together.” Indeed, the close bond between them was the subject of sniping comments by the other members of the Viterbo circle, some of which accused her of being “too maternally carnal.”

In the course of their contact in Viterbo Pole rapidly moved from the role of the needy son to that of Vittoria’s spiritual advisor and counselor. He increasingly found

---


56 In one sonnet to Pole, she begins by addressing him as her “son and lord” (“figlio e signore”) and calls herself his “second mother” (“la novella tua madre”). Quoted in Brundin, Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Politics of the Italian Reformation, 113-14.

57 Jerrold, Vittoria Colonna, With Some Account of Her Friends and Times, 117.

58 In a letter to Giovanni Morone in 1542, Vittoria asks him to “act as a shield” against the comments of other members, who have been saying that she is “troppo maternamente carnale e simil cose.” (Too maternally carnal and like things.) Cited in Brundin, Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Politics of the Italian Reformation, 68 n.5. No one knows precisely what the phrase “maternally carnal” means.
himself having to calm her down and limit her religious excesses. As detailed in later testimony by Pietro Carnesecchi,\textsuperscript{59} before the Roman Inquisition,

> Before the Signora Marchesa contracted her friendship with the cardinal she used to afflict herself so much with fasts, sackcloth, and other mortifications of the flesh that she had reduced herself to skin and bone, and this she did, perhaps, because she placed too much confidence in such works, imagining that true piety and religion, and consequently the salvation of one’s soul, consisted in these things. But after being advised by the cardinal that she rather offended God than otherwise by treating her body with such austerity and rigor . . . the aforesaid Signora began to desist from that very austere mode of life.\textsuperscript{60}

Pole’s admonition was both medically apt and consonant with the Valdesian views of the spirituali. The Beneficio speaks of such acts of mortification as attempts at “self-justification”, which reflect “painful and slavish anxieties” that are “not consistent with the life of a Christian.”\textsuperscript{61} They offend God because Christ’s suffering alone is sufficient for justification; to engage in self-inflicted suffering is to deny that God alone can effectuate salvation.

From 1541 until her death in 1547, Vittoria and Pole were regular correspondents, but the relationship was not without its difficulties. Pole, for his part, seems to have pulled back considerably from the intimacy of their early relationship. At one point Vittoria complained about Pole’s lack of response to one of her gifts, saying that he

\textsuperscript{59} Pietro Carnesecchi was an apostolic prynotary to the Curia and had been first secretary to Clement VII. A longtime friend of both Vittoria Colonna and Giulia Gonzaga, as well as of Valdés himself, Carnesecchi repeatedly came under scrutiny by the Inquisition from 1553 to 1557, and again in 1566-67. The quoted testimony comes from his trial in 1556, in which the members of the Inquisition asked repeatedly about his relationship with the members of the Viterbo circle. Carnesecchi was found guilty of heresy and was beheaded and burned on October 1, 1567.

\textsuperscript{60} Translated by Jerrold, \textit{Vittoria Colonna, With Some Account of Her Friends and Times}, 276-77. The testimony is from Carnesecchi’s trial in 1557, in which he was repeatedly asked about the activities of the various spirituali cenacoli, both those conducted by Vittoria Colona in Naples and Rome, and that sponsored by Pole in the “Church of Viterbo.”

\textsuperscript{61} Valdés, \textit{Benefit of Christ}, 159.
accepted her present, “with the very poorest grace.” Pole seems to have repeatedly
demurred in responding to her letters, and to have gone out of his way to show others that
he had distanced himself from her. How much of this reaction was due to a fear of any
scandal that might ensue from a churchman’s relationship with a single woman, and how
much was due to his own tiring of her constant attention, is difficult to discern.

Yet even as Pole withdrew somewhat from emotional contact, he assumed a
guiding hand over Vittoria’s spiritual education. She responded by urging him to adopt a
more energetic and radical stance on matters of religion, and particularly on the doctrine
of justification by faith alone. Pole seems to have bristled at her importunacy, “warning
her against reading Luther, Bucer, Calvin or Melanchthon, and generally recommending
that ‘she ought to guard herself from curiosity.’” Pole evidently viewed himself as
being better suited, both as a man and as a churchman, to understanding the complexities
of the religious issues raised by the spirituali beliefs. Vittoria, however, recognized that
Pole was the spirituali’s best and most effective means to translate the group’s beliefs
into church doctrine, and did not tire of using her relationship with him to further that
end.

Conclusions

62 Quoted in Mayer, Reginald Pole, 140. Brundin says that “a number of her letters testify to
Colonna’s disappointment at being neglected or abandoned by Pole.” Brundin, Sonnets for Michelangelo,
17.

63 Brundin, Sonnets for Michelangelo, 17.

64 The possibility that Pole had homosexual inclinations may further explain his distance. See
Chapter 4, note 71.

65 Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Cardinal Pole and the Counter Reformation,
96, quoting from testimony of Carnesecchi at his subsequent trial by the Inquisition.
Vittoria Colonna’s unique position and talent allowed her to play a central role in the efforts of the spirituali to reform and personalize both art and religion in Italy in the sixteenth century. Her aristocratic background allowed her to bring together some of the greatest writers, artists and religious minds of her time in salons she organized in Ischia and Rome. Her achievements as “the most published and widely admired woman writer of the sixteenth century in Italy”\textsuperscript{66} gave her a platform to advance and disseminate the ideas of the spirituali in her poetry. She is the common link between Michelangelo and Reginald Pole, and she used her friendship with both of them to urge each to promote the group’s religious views in his work. When she died in 1547, at the age of 57, a critical part of the spirituali energy died as well.

\textsuperscript{66} Brundin, \textit{Sonnets for Michelangelo}, 2.
CHAPTER THREE

MICHELANGELO

As is true of so much of his life and work, Michelangelo’s role in the spirituali movement defies easy explanation. He is the only one of the group who is an artist rather than a cleric or primarily a writer.\(^1\) Although his social status was far lower than that of either Vittoria Colonna or Reginald Pole – or than many other members of the spirituali – he more than made up for that lack of standing with a towering reputation as the great artistic genius of his time. Indeed, he achieved the unique title of “divino” among Italian cultural circles,\(^2\) and his “fellow artists…looked up to him as a patriarch and paid homage to every judgment that he expressed.”\(^3\) Although he does seem to have participated in Vittoria’s salons in Rome, Michelangelo’s actual participation in the spirituali cenacoli was sporadic. Yet he counted both Vittoria Colonna and Reginald Pole as his close friends, and relied upon both of them for spiritual guidance and strength. And ultimately his position as the preferred artist of both Popes Clement VII and Paul III put him in a unique position to use his art to promote the views of the spirituali.

\(^1\) It is not that Michelangelo was not a writer. Michelangelo’s sonnets were well received at the time and are still in publication today. He considered his poetry and his art to be equally important, and in fact part of the same artistic expression.

\(^2\) The description “divino” seems to have been first used by Giorgio Vasari in his chapter on Michelangelo in the Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 341. In his Lives, Vasari begins his biography of Michelangelo with a description of Michelangelo’s astrological chart, noting that the configuration of the stars “suggest he was something celestial and divine beyond the use of mortals.” According to de Holanda, the cognomen was also used by Aretino in his satirical letters. De Holanda, Dialogues with Michelangelo, 52.

\(^3\) Pastor, The History of the Popes from the Close of the Middle Ages, 12:595.
Religious Influences -- Platonism

To understand how Michelangelo came to be counted among the spirituali, and to see how he used his art to advance the group’s beliefs, it is first necessary to examine the religious influences that led to his receptiveness to the group’s ideas when he first encountered Vittoria Colonna and Reginald Pole in the mid 1530’s. Michelangelo’s religious education may be said to have begun in 1489 when, at the ripe age of “15 or 16,” he was taken from Ghirlandaio’s studio in Florence where he was apprenticed, and introduced into the household of Lorenzo de Medici, known as “Il Magnifico.” According to both Vasari and Condivi, his two contemporary biographers, Michelangelo spent two to four years with the Medici, living as one of the family and sharing the dinner table with Lorenzo’s sons and nephews (Lorenzo’s nephew Giulio would become Pope Clement VII). During this time, he worked on his skills as a sculptor, designing a piece specifically for Lorenzo.

He was not only there to sculpt. The evidence suggests that he attended lectures and readings given by members of Lorenzo’s “Accademia,” a circle of literary lights that included such famous humanists as Angelo Poliziano and the Neo-Platonist philosopher

---

4 Condivi, The Life of Michelangelo, 50.

5 According to Condivi, Michelangelo’s later biographer, Michelangelo spent two years with the Medici. Ibid. According to Vasari, Michelangelo spent four years in Lorenzo’s house. Vasari, Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, 345.

6 Both Condivi and Vasari refer to Michelangelo eating at table with Lorenzo. According to Condivi, at the table “Michael Angelo was seated even above the sons of Lorenzo and other persons of quality.” Condivi, The Life of Michelangelo, 49; Vasari, Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects,345.
Marsilio Ficino. Condivi reported that Poliziano would regularly meet with “the boy” Michelangelo and instruct him in studies of the classics. But for Michelangelo’s religious views, the influence of Ficino was to have a more profound impact. Ficino was known as the re-discoverer, translator, and promoter of the work of Plotinus, a fifth-century Roman Platonist. The influence of Plotinus’ thinking on Michelangelo’s religious orientation and artistic expression would prove to be both profound and long-lasting.

According to Plotinus, man’s soul can progress upward toward “the One” (later equated with God by Christian Platonists such as Ficino) through the contemplation of works of beauty. Plotinus held that “art exhibited in the material work derives from an art yet higher,” that is, it “participates” in the idea or Platonic “form” of beauty by being beautiful. When man “sees” a beautiful thing in a contemplative way (“by that which the soul sees things”), his soul can join in the participation of the form of Beauty, which is identical to the form of the Good. By participating in Beauty, the soul begins a journey toward the higher reality that is the One. As Plotinus put it, “the soul, since it is by nature …related to the higher kind of reality in the realm of being, when it sees something akin to it or a trace of its kindred reality, is delighted and thrilled and returns to itself and remembers itself.”

---

7 Condivi, The Life of Michelangelo, 50-51. Poliziano was among the most famous humanists of the Florentine Renaissance. His portrait, standing with Marsilio Ficino and Cristoforo Landino, appears in a Ghirlandaio fresco in the Tuornaboni Chapel of the Church of Sta. Maria Novella in Florence.

8 Plotinus, Enneads, VIII.1. See also I.6.2 (“On Beauty”): “We maintain that the things in this world are beautiful by participating in form…” In Steven MacKenna, trans., The Enneads (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957).

9 Ibid., I.6.2.
should) strive to move upward toward a personal union with God; and second, art can play an important role in prompting this upward movement.

But Plotinus did not stop there. In addition, he held that the artist essentially could imitate the action of God by bringing the Idea, or form, to inert matter in the creation of a work of beauty. That is, the artist has a unique role in bringing the beauty of the form, inherent in matter, into its full expression, thereby aiding the beholder (and himself) in his spiritual journey toward the higher reality.

These Neo-Platonist ideas remained a central part of Michelangelo’s religious and artistic beliefs throughout his life. In one of his best-known sonnets, written specifically for Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo expressed his views compellingly:

No block of marble but it does not hide
The concept living in the artist’s mind –
Pursuing it inside that form, he’ll guide
His hand to shape what reason has defined.10

The idea of freeing the “form,” or Platonic idea, from the stone would animate much of Michelangelo’s sculpture, as seen perhaps most clearly in his “captivi” statues, where the form of a man or woman struggles to free itself from the stone. For Michelangelo, however, this was not merely a matter of style; it was part of his virtual obsession with using his art to effectuate his personal religious struggle toward God.

---

Religious Influences – Savanarola

In 1492 Lorenzo de Medici died. Shortly thereafter, Michelangelo moved out of the Medici family household and began his career as a sculptor in Florence. At this moment, however, Florence was coming under the virtual control of Girolamo Savanarola, the Dominican preacher whose fiery sermons drew large crowds to the “Duomo,” or Cathedral of Florence, and who would eventually come to control, directly or indirectly, both the political and social life of the city. While Michelangelo never become a devoted follower of Savanarola, or piagnone, in the way that other Florentine artists such as Boticelli did, Savanarola’s sermons had a lasting influence upon him. According to Condivi, Michelangelo maintained even in old age that he could still hear “the living voice” of the preacher ringing in his ears.11

While Savanarola today is best remembered for his fanatical attempts to impose a puritanical order on Florentine society through such innovations as his “bonfires of the vanities,” his precepts were more reform-oriented than is commonly recognized. Savanarola thundered against the immorality and corruption of the church in general and the papacy in particular. But his disdain for the bureaucracy and trappings of the church was only the starting point for what Savanarola really intended: the restoration of a personal relationship between the faithful and God. As he put it, “The Lord desires inner worship without eternal ceremonies…[C]eremonies are like medicines for those souls which do not have real fervor.”12 “Don’t hope,” he wrote, “in external things.”13

11 Condivi, The Life of Michelangelo, 166.

Moreover, as an apocalyptic who believed the last days were at hand, Savanarola believed that man had sunk into such a state of depravity that only immediate and fervent repentance would suffice. Men must throw off their reliance upon the church’s “economy of salvation” and open their hearts to a direct communication with God.¹⁴

The dual influences of Neo-Platonism and Savanarolan fervor came together in a unique way in Michelangelo. On the one hand, he was obsessed with the idea that, as an artist, he could create works of beauty that allowed him both to facilitate and to participate in the journey of the human soul out of its earthly prison and into communion with God. On the other hand, he was tormented by his religious demons, constantly nagged by hyper-awareness of his own sinfulness and spiritual failings. He remained a devout Catholic even as he recoiled at the excesses and immorality of the bishops and popes that he served. As he grew older his fear of damnation increased as he contemplated the prospect that he might well be facing the “second death” that followed physical demise.¹⁵ The spiritual fears and doubts that plagued Michelangelo made him an ideal subject for the program of the spirituali.

---

¹³ Quoted in Nagel, Michelangelo and the Reform of Art, 110.


**Vittoria Colonna and the Spirituali**

As we have seen, Michelangelo met Vittoria Colonna in 1536 or 1538, most probably in 1536.\(^{16}\) They became close friends, sharing a high-strung artistic temperament, a considerable reputation in Italian cultural circles, and a preoccupation with religious issues that bordered on obsession. Although fifteen years his junior, the Marchioness was able to convey a maternal affection to the older artist, “a human concern, warmth, and a tender goodness for which he felt a deep gratitude.”\(^{17}\) Some of this closeness may have stemmed from the fact that, perhaps for the first time in his life, Michelangelo was able to feel and express love for a woman.\(^{18}\) A better explanation for Michelangelo’s feelings for Vittoria, however, is that the relationship represented for him the embodiment of the Platonic love celebrated by Marsilio Ficino: “the mutual affection and friendship between two persons who are dedicated to the contemplative life and hence recognize that their mutual relationship is founded on the love each of them has for

---

\(^{16}\) Most sources include both dates as possible first meetings. See, e.g., Brundin, 28 and sources listed in n.46. However, de Holanda’s *Dialogues with Michelangelo*, which purports to take place in the summer of 1539, portrays the two as sharing a profound and intimate friendship, one which is not likely to have begun just the year before. De Holanda’s description would thus seem to support an earlier dating of their relationship.


\(^{18}\) See Connor, *The Last Judgment: Michelangelo and the Death of the Renaissance*, 121. In recent years much debate has been generated by the question whether Michelangelo was a homosexual and whether his “homoerotic feelings” could have been the cause of his lifelong spiritual torment. (For a contrary view, see De Tolnay, 53.) The question of Michelangelo’s sexual orientation is beyond the scope of this paper. It is sufficient to understand that Michelangelo was tormented by religious and spiritual issues, and that these played a major role in his association with the spirituali and promotion of their beliefs.
Whether his love for Vittoria was physical or purely “Platonic,” “there is no doubt that Michelangelo fell deeply in love with her.”

Vittoria was determined to use her friendship with the artist “to bring Michelangelo in the sphere of the Spirituali.” He did not hesitate to respond. In fact, it is apparent that Michelangelo came to see Vittoria as something of a spiritual muse, a role comparable to that of Dante’s Beatrice or Petrarch’s Laura. In one of his most memorable sonnets to her he wrote –

Toward your luminous diadem,
By the steep and long road,
It is only, Lady, through your humility and courtesy
That I hope to rise:
The climb grows, and my strength falters
And breath fails me halfway

The poem evokes not only Dante’s climb in the *Purgatorio*, but also the Neo-Platonic journey of the soul toward God. Michelangelo sees Vittoria as an image of God’s light toward which his soul is striving.

Vittoria brought Michelangelo into her circle at San Silvestro in Capite in Rome, introducing him to the other participants, including Reginald Pole. At meetings of

---


21 Ibid., 117.


Vittoria’s Rome *cenacolo* Michelangelo attended sermons on the epistles of St. Paul and was exposed to the thought of Valdés through the influence of Marcantonio Flaminio, Pole and others. 24 Indeed, Pole would become one of Michelangelo’s close friends, according to Condivi, 25 and their continuing correspondence “suggests a similar degree of intimacy between [Pole] and Michelangelo as between Michelangelo and Colonna.” 26 As a determined poet with considerable classical background, Michelangelo could join in the *cenacolo*’s discussions of literary and humanist works as well as engaging in the religious issues that were a major part of the Marchioness’ concern.

The Valdesian principles that the Rome *cenacolo* promoted, however, found a particular resonance with Michelangelo. The idea of a direct personal relationship between man and God, in which man was always seeking to open himself to God’s grace, meshed well with Michelangelo’s Neo-Platonist idea of the descent of “the One” into matter and the soul’s attempt, through beauty, to return to God. More significantly, the concept that man was saved by faith alone, eliminating the need for the strict observance of the law, offered Michelangelo an avenue of relief from the religious torments that plagued him throughout his life. Much the way that the idea of justification by faith alone relieved Luther of his religious doubts, the Valdesian teaching of justification by faith meant that Michelangelo did not have to worry whether he had done enough to “merit” eternal life; by his faith in the redemptive power of Christ alone he was already

---

24 In de Holanda’s *Dialogues*, Michelangelo meets with “the Marchesa” shortly after attending a lecture by Fra’ Ambrogio on Paul’s epistles. De Holanda, *Dialogues with Michelangelo*, 33.


saved. Vittoria Colonna stressed this belief to Michelangelo and brought him considerable spiritual comfort in the process.

Vittoria also emphasized with Michelangelo the need to express these spiritual ideas in his art. In de Holanda’s *Dialogues*, she is quoted as saying –

…who will be the virtuous and serene man . . . who will not show great reverence and adore the spiritual contemplation and devotion of holy painting? I think that time would sooner be lacking than material for the praises of this virtue. It produces joy in the melancholy. It brings both the contended and the angry man to the knowledge of human misery; it moves the obstinate to compunction, the mundane to penitence, the contemplative to contemplation, and the fearful to shame. It shows us death and who we are more gently than in any other way; the torments and dangers of hell; it represents to us the glory and peace of the blessed, and the incomprehensible image of our Lord God.27

Note the emphasis here on both the Neo-Platonic idea that art (beauty) can be used to promote “contemplation” (the soul’s journey toward God), and that “holy painting” can promote the Valdesian direct relationship with God through a personal contemplation of God’s “incomprehensible image.” Art, and particularly painting, is seen as an important means to facilitate the direct, personal relationship between man and God. It is appropriate, then, to examine the extent to which Michelangelo put these ideas to work in his art.

From the time that he met Vittoria Colonna in 1536 until her death in 1547, Michelangelo undertook several artistic projects in which he had an opportunity to express the beliefs he was encountering with the *spirituali*. To begin with, he created two

---

27 De Holanda, *Dialogues with Michelangelo*, 57-58. I use the word “quote” advisedly, recognizing that de Holanda was not attempting an accurate reporting of what Colonna said, but rather a rendering of what she represented, in keeping with the classical idea of dialogues as expressions of arguments.
drawings specifically for Vittoria, which he gave to her as part of the gift-giving practices of the group’s members. Since these two drawings were intended for private enjoyment only, I will not discuss them here.28 During this period, however, Michelangelo created three public paintings that are among his most memorable works. The first was the *Last Judgment*, in the Sistine Chapel; the second and third were the *Conversion of Saul* and the *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, both in the Pauline Chapel. In each of these three paintings the influence of the *spirituali* can be readily discerned.

*The Last Judgment*

Although Michelangelo originally received the commission for the *Last Judgment* from his childhood friend Pope Clement VII in 1533, that commission was enthusiastically renewed by Paul III after he became Pope in 1534. Michelangelo began work in earnest on the fresco sometime in late 1537,29 not long after meeting Vittoria Colonna and being introduced into her circle, and did not complete it until the middle of 1541. The work thus encompasses the time of Michelangelo’s early association with the *spirituali*. Although the *Last Judgment* is generally agreed to be primarily a work of Renaissance sensibility,30 it would be surprising if it did not reflect some considerable part of the evangelical beliefs of the group – as indeed it does.

---

28 Eventually these two drawings – a *pietà* with the Virgin at the foot of the cross, and a crucifixion – would become part of Michelangelo’s public oeuvre, as they were both specifically mentioned by Condivi in his biography. Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, 163-64. For a full analysis of these two drawings and their meaning for the *spirituali*, see Nagel, *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art*, 143-47.


To begin with, the fundamental structure of the fresco is radical in concept. [Plate 1].

PLATE 1: *The Last Judgment*

Set upon a vertical axis running just to the left of the center of the wall, the large, central figure of Christ dominates the painting. [Plate 2]. Unlike virtually all previous depictions of the theme, this is an active and engaged Christ, one whose very arms simultaneously initiate and conduct the overwhelming circular movement of the entire event. Previous treatments of the last judgment, common especially in Medieval culture, portrayed a static Christ, one who has already judged the saved and the damned. Michelangelo’s Christ, by contrast, is involved in a “revolving dynamism…a sort of cosmic whirlpool.” The entire fresco moves around this whirlpool, with the saved rising from their graves on the left and the damned falling to perdition on the right. As Valdés attempts to do in the Beneficio, Michelangelo places Christ at the center of a dramatic relationship with humanity. This is a figure with which human beings must be engaged, here and now.

32 De Tolnay, Michelangelo, 5:22.
Plate 2: Detail of the Active Christ at the Center of the “Cosmic Whirlpool”
Within the painting itself, there are several motifs in the *Last Judgment* that directly express the *spirituali* idea of justification by faith alone. First, there is the striking figure of the Virgin, placed at Christ’s left side in the traditional position, but recoiling in fear from the terrible judgment being rendered by her son. This is effectively a rejection of the Virgin’s role, well developed from the early Medieval period, as intercessor with Christ for mercy upon men’s souls. Christ intervenes and damns or saves men directly, without intercession by either the Virgin or the saints. Indeed, it can be seen as a rejection of the Church’s “economy of salvation,” in which the faithful rely upon the saints and the Virgin to intercede on their behalf, and upon the sacraments to obtain “merit” that will increase their value in the eyes of God. It reflects Valdés’ idea that each person must establish his or her own direct relationship with God, without “superstition” or ceremony.

Similarly, many of the figures on the left side of the painting rise toward heaven on their own, “partly without help, as if borne up by ecstasy.” The help they receive is from other souls, not from angels, in accordance with Valdesian teaching that the elect “must give ourselves to our neighbors and brethren in Jesus Christ.” On the lower right corner of the mass of rising bodies two souls are pulled up by means of the rosary. [Plate 3].

---

33 Pope Paul IV would later condemn not only the nudity in the *Last Judgment*, but also the fact that the saints and elect communicated directly with God, leaving no room for the Church.


Plate 3: Detail of the Faithful Being Pulled Up by the “Chain of Faith”
This is in accordance with the Valdesian concept of continuous prayer and contemplation as the best means for the individual to “grow in faith as part of his journey toward God,” and accords as well with one of Michelangelo’s own sonnets in which he spoke of “the chain of faith.” In contrast, the figures descending into hell on the right side of the painting include the earthly “high and mighty”: one is actually dragged down by a bag of money, holding two keys, likely a reference to a Pope. Michelangelo is saying that “without faith and without God’s help even the most powerful are helpless.”

Finally, on the upper right edge of the fresco is a large (De Tolnay says “gigantic”) figure carrying a cross on his back. This figure has been identified by some as Dismas, the “good” thief who was crucified with Christ and whom Jesus promised “will be with me in Paradise.” Others have identified him as Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus’ cross on the way to the crucifixion. Either way, the importance of the figure is to emphasize the personal relationship of man – in this case the individual viewer – to Christ crucified, in accordance with the Valdesian teaching that each person must seek to carry Christ’s cross himself. The faithful must

36 Ibid., 143.
37 The phrase used in Michelangelo’s sonnet is “la catena della fede,” literally, the chain of faith. De Tolnay, Michelangelo, 5:117, 54n.
38 De Tolnay, Michelangelo, 5:58.
39 Ibid., 40.
40 Ibid.
41 Matthew 23:43.
look to an individual relationship with the cross in order to become, as Valdés put it, “clothed in the suffering of Christ.”

Plate 4: Dismas (or Simon of Cyrene) Holding Cross (At Right)
On Christmas Day, 1541, the Sistine Chapel was opened to the public and hundreds trooped in to view the *Last Judgment*. By all accounts it was a sensation, provoking strong reactions, both positive and negative. Many, including Michelangelo’s biographers Condivi and Vasari, saw it as “sublime” and the culmination of Renaissance art. Others, however, saw it as excessive in its portrayal of the naked human form, and completely inappropriate for a chapel. Biagio de Cesena, the Pope’s master of ceremonies, said that it “belonged in a tavern,” and the famous Italian satirist Pietro Aretino roundly condemned it in a series of widely circulated letters. The work was condemned, too, by the Theatines, a puritanical religious order formed by Cardinal Gian Petro Carafa, an important prelate who would ultimately prove instrumental in frustrating the goals of the *spirituali* and attacking them personally.

*The Pauline Chapel Frescoes*

All evidence indicates that Michelangelo, who was notoriously thin-skinned about criticism of his work, was deeply wounded by the criticism of the *Last Judgment*. To be sure, Michelangelo did not intend that the public at large would view his work, since

---

43 Vasari, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 390. At the time, the Sistine Chapel was not open to the public but was a private chapel for the Pope and the papal court.


47 Ibid., 192.

48 Ibid., 69.
the Sistine Chapel was built for the exclusive use of the Pope and “his famiglia, his household and his staff.” It is possible that Michelangelo reacted to the criticism of the Last Judgment by assuring that his next paintings would be certain to be viewed by the Pope and his circle alone. Certainly his next two paintings, the Conversion of Saul and the Crucifixion of St. Peter, were specifically directed to a much more limited audience. Both paintings are part of the “Capella Paolina,” or Pauline Chapel, the Pope’s private chapel located to the side of the larger Sistine Chapel. This chapel has never been open to the general public, even today. The works must therefore be understood as something of a private, or at least direct, communication between Michelangelo and Pope Paul III – as well as to his successors.

The Conversion of Saul and the Crucifixion of St. Peter face each other directly from the two lateral walls of the chapel. It is apparent that they were undertaken as a pair, to the point that it is not known for certain which one was started or finished first. It is not without significance that the themes of the two paintings are somewhat discordant: thematically, the pairing should be either a conversion of Saul with the

---

49 Ibid., 189.


52 Both De Tolnay and Leo Steinberg, the other great critic of the works, believe the Conversion of Saul to have been completed first, but credit that conclusion to that painting’s greater similarity to Michelangelo’s previous work, the Last Judgment, rather than to any direct evidence. See De Tolnay, Michelangelo, 5:70, and Leo Steinberg, Michelangelo’s Last Paintings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 64.
That the two paintings, so clearly intended to be in communication with each other, have somewhat “discordant” themes therefore may be taken as evidence of Michelangelo’s intention to provoke thought and contemplation in their intended audience, the highly learned Paul III.

The *Conversion of Saul* violated contemporary artistic convention in many ways. To begin with, the painting’s composition is structured as something of a wheel at the end of an axis – not unlike the movement of Christ in the *Last Judgment* – although the axis here is a diagonal rather than a vertical. [Plate 4 and Plate 1] Here, however, the wheel is formed at the bottom of the axis (rather than the top, as it is in the *Last Judgment*) by the bodies of several figures including, particularly, that of Saul. The “axis” is the wide beam of light extending from the body of a radically foreshortened Christ at the very top of the frame downward, and not quite vertically, to Saul. The beam dominates and divides the entire painting. While De Tolnay notes that the idea of Saul receiving his “mission” as a beam of light had its parallels in other fifteenth-century Florentine works, for the most part these other works portrayed the beam as a single ray rather than as a broad, luminous beam.\footnote{Ibid., 71. Both De Tolnay and the earlier analysis by Leo Steinberg look to a painting by Benozzo Gozzoli (now in the Metropolitan Museum) and to a drawing by Bartolommeo di Giovanni in the Uffizi, for prior examples of the beam of light. Steinberg, *Michelangelo’s Last Paintings*, 24.} The yellow light that “pours” from Christ toward Saul is thus a startling image of Christ’s “supernatural grace” descending directly toward Paul, an

image that would have pleased Valdés as much as it did his followers. It is almost a visual representation of the “lamp” of light described by Vittoria Colonna in her sonnets.

Plate 5: The Conversion of Saul

The recipient of this grace is, moreover, a most unusual Saul. He is portrayed as an old man, a portrayal at odds both with “sacred liturgical tradition” (of a man at the
beginning of his career as an apostle) and with the most famous contemporary rendition of the scene (until then), by Raphael in a tapestry for the Sistine Chapel. 55

Michelangelo must have intended to emphasize the anomaly by casting Saul in this way. 56 At least one critic, Leo Steinberg, sees the depiction of Saul as an old man as, in effect, a Michelangelo self-portrait, noting the “flattened nose and forked beard” that

55 Steinberg Michelangelo’s Last Paintings, 25.
56 De Tolnay points out, however, that the depiction of Saul as an old man is also not without precedent. De Tolnay, Michelangelo, 5:70-71.
reveal “the artist’s old, tired features.”\textsuperscript{57} However, Steinberg, who was one of the first to find Michelangelo’s self-portrait in the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew in the Last Judgment, seems to have seen Michelangelo’s self-portraits everywhere. He finds not one but two self-portraits in the Crucifixion of St. Peter.

While the depiction of Saul as a Michelangelo self-portrait is certainly a possibility, there is another possibility that may be equally likely. Pope Paul III was, at the time of the painting of the Conversion of Saul, also an old man, with a long and forked beard. While Paul had an aquiline rather than a flattened nose, a close examination of Saul’s face reveals that the “flattening” of his nose in the painting is an effect of the light, and that the nose is actually more pointed than it first appears. Michelangelo had already used Paul III’s face as a “model” in his depiction of St. Peter in the Last Judgment. Given the fact that the Pope, the former Alessandro Farnese, had deliberately taken Paul as his namesake upon becoming Pope, it is not unrealistic to conclude that Michelangelo intended Paul III to see himself in the painting, portrayed at the instant that Saul becomes Paul through the gift of God’s grace.

Both the positioning and the facial expression of Saul deserve comment. Saul’s body is twisted in an arc that forms the bottom of the circle of men at the bottom of the column of light. Although Saul’s body lies on the ground, it seems almost to float there, not really pressing on the ground or casting a deep shadow. At the same time, Saul’s eyes are closed. While these depictions are well within the “iconographic tradition of the

\textsuperscript{57} Steinberg, Michelangelo’s Last Paintings, 39.
fifteenth century,”58 the point of the presentation is clear: Saul is receiving a transformative inner light that cannot be seen with the eyes. He has come to know God directly and in his innermost being. It is almost a visual portrayal of the statement in the Beneficio that “the Christian knows God by the revelation of Christ when Christ permits Himself to be known to him.”59

In the Conversion of Saul, the movement of the entire painting revolves around the axis of light and the circle formed by Saul and his companions. The left side of the painting shows sharp movement downward and outward (toward the viewer) from Christ to Saul. The right side of the painting shows movement upward and away from the viewer, as Saul’s horse flees to the distance. It is a dynamic movement that mirrors the circular movement of the Last Judgment, but in reverse – whereas the downward movement in the Last Judgment was on the right side of the painting and the upward movement was on the left, here the downward movement is on the left and the upward on the right. In both paintings, though, the circle at the end of the axis serves as both the principal focus of the viewer’s attention and the source of energy that drives the whole scene.

Compare the visual structure of the Conversion of Saul with that of the Crucifixion of St. Peter: [Plate 7]

58 De Tolnay, Michelangelo, 5:140, 9n. De Tolnay and Steinberg draw comparisons of Saul’s body to the classical depiction of the river god. De Tolnay, Michelangelo, 5:73; Steinberg, Michelangelo’s Last Paintings, 28.

59 Valdés, Benefit of Christ, 18.
Plate 7: The Crucifixion of St. Peter

The Crucifixion of St. Peter begins with the same circle at the end of an axis. Here, the axis is formed by Peter’s cross, and moves downward from the right of the painting to the left, rather than (as in the Conversion of Saul), from the left of the painting to the right. When it is remembered, however, that the two paintings are opposite each other, the axes of both paintings proceed from the same place and in the same direction.
Like the *Conversion of Saul*, too, the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* consists of a wheel of men at the bottom of the axis, with the bottom of the wheel formed by the violently contorted body of Peter.

Yet the “wheel” that is the focus of attention in the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* could not be more different from that in the *Conversion of Saul*. In the *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, the wheel serves not to impel the motion of the painting but rather to imprison it. As Peter is nailed to the cross, the figures supporting the cross strain to remain within the circle. The figures surrounding the cross, moreover, are not forced upward or downward by the energy of the circle. Rather, they have an ambivalent relationship with it. Some, like the Roman captain on the horse at the far left, are both pointing toward and simultaneously looking away. Others, such as the large figure in the Phrygian cap on the lower right, seem to be almost unaware of the tragedy taking place beside them. Unlike the *Conversion of Saul*, the movement of the *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, to the extent it exists, is centripetal rather than centrifugal.

A stark contrast with the *Conversion of Saul*, too, is presented by the figure of St. Peter. [Plate 8] Unlike the figure of Saul, whose eyes are closed as he receives the “justifying grace” of God, Peter stares out, wide-eyed, from the painting. Indeed it is Peter’s stare that conveys the most powerful energy of the entire painting. It is apparent

---

60 Both Steinberg and De Tolnay see in this figure yet another Michelangelo self-portrait. De Tolnay, *Michelangelo*, 5:75; Steinberg, *Michelangelo’s Last Paintings*, 53. If that is true, the sorrowful countenance of the figure may express Michelangelo’s frustration and sorrow over his inability to forestall the spiritual imprisonment of the heir to St. Peter, Paul III, at the hands of the scholastics in the Council of Trent.

61 De Tolnay writes that “the Apostle Peter…is the only one [in the entire painting] who seems to be fully aware of what is happening.” De Tolnay, *Michelangelo*, 5:76.
that he is staring at the viewer, seemingly in a look of violent reproach. His stare expresses, too, a fury at the crucifixion he is about to receive at the hands of the unconcerned soldiers and onlookers who surround him. When it is remembered that the painting was intended for the private contemplation of Paul III, it is apparent that Michelangelo was intending a stark warning to his friend the Pope: do not let this happen to you.

Plate 8: Detail of St. Peter’s Face in the Crucifixion of St. Peter

To understand further the messages that seem to be conveyed by the two frescoes, it is important to remember when they were painted: between November of 1542 and the time of Paul III’s death in 1549. This was the precise time of the early sessions of the Council of Trent. As we will see in greater detail in the next chapter, the most important
session of the Council occurred in 1546 and 1547. It was during this session that the Council formulated its doctrines on justification by faith and by works, doctrines that would prove profoundly disappointing, if not quite fatal, to the spirituali movement.

In this historical context, the two paintings can be seen as conveying a twofold message directly to Paul III. The first message, conveyed by the Conversion of Saul, is one of faith and hope: salvation is possible, but only by direct communication with God through a personal, inner reception of God’s grace. The Pauline Pope must look to the first Paul (Saul) for an example that justification comes through the inner light of faith, received directly from Christ. The second message, however, can be seen as both a remonstration and a lamentation of what has happened at the Council: the Pope has allowed the theologians of the Council to imprison the ideal of a personal faith within a set of doctrines and ceremonies developed by theologians who are as stupefied as the Roman soldiers and onlookers in the Crucifixion of St. Peter. The Church has become mired yet again in useless ceremony and concern with merit, in direct contravention of the teachings of Valdés. Michelangelo must have been well aware of the statement in the Beneficio: “how foolish are those who depend on their own self-righteousness and presume that they can make use of their works to save themselves.”62 Like his St. Peter on the cross, Michelangelo was undoubtedly furious at what had transpired at Trent.

Conclusion

Michelangelo became an important part of the spirituali through his close friendships with Vittoria Colonna and Reginald Pole. Powerfully influenced by both Neo-Platonic

---

62 Valdés, Benefit of Christ, 125.
thought and Savanarolan sermons on the need for a personal relationship with God, he
found in the teachings of Valdés a way to calm his lifelong spiritual torments. And he
sought to propagate these teachings in his poetry and his painting. In the Last Judgment,
and more directly in the Pauline Chapel frescoes, he sought to communicate directly to
the Pope the need for a personal, direct relationship with Christ and a release from the
“self-righteousness” of the doctrines of the Council of Trent.
CHAPTER FOUR
REGINALD POLE

Among the spirituali – and perhaps in all of sixteenth-century Europe – it would be hard to find a more tragic figure than Reginald Pole. Born into the highest ranks of the nobility, the scion of two illustrious British families, he was endowed with status, superior intelligence and considerable personal charm. Of all the spirituali, he was probably the best positioned to put the group’s beliefs into concrete action in the Church. Yet he seems to have been “on the wrong side” of so much of the history of the first half of the sixteenth century. Whichever way the political and religious winds were blowing, he seems to have been determined to tack against them. The role of this conflicted and complex man in the spirituali movement must therefore be examined with considerable care. Because his background and education are essential to understanding both what he believed and how he acted, it is necessary to begin with them.

Background and Education

Reginald Pole was literally born in a castle: Stourton Castle in Staffordshire. His mother, Margaret, was the daughter of George Plantagenet, Duke of Clarence (the “loyal” brother of Edward IV and Richard III). This made Pole a grand-nephew of the last Yorkist King of England, as well as a cousin of Henry VIII. Margaret was also a descendant of the powerful north England family the Nevilles, and was one of only two

---

1 I use the word “loyal” deliberately to emphasize the fact that after supporting his elder brother Edward IV, Clarence changed sides to support Henry VI, then returned to support Edward IV again. In Richard III (Act 1, Scene 4) Shakespeare called him “false, fleeting, perjur’d Clarence” and ultimately had him drowned “in a butt of malmsey.” Clarence is an intriguing ancestor for Pole, given Pole’s lifelong tendency to take the losing side in disputes, even when it meant switching sides to do so.
women in sixteenth-century England to be a peeress in her own right. On his father’s side Pole descended from an ancient Welsh family, his father being one of Henry VII’s battalion commanders. Pole never forgot, however, that in Yorkist eyes he was a Plantagenet who possessed a claim to the throne superior to that of Henry VIII.

Pole was educated at Magdalene College, Oxford. That he attended Magdalene is a testament not only to his high rank but also to his evident intellectual promise. At Oxford, Pole was exposed to some of the great humanist minds of England. He became a student of Thomas Lupset and Lupset’s teacher John Colet. Colet was not only a classical scholar of great renown but, more significantly for Pole, he was a strident voice for both “Pauline soteriology and Neoplatonic cosmology.” Colet had also traveled to Italy and had “come under the influence” of both Savanarola and Marsilio Ficino for a period. He argued for both the administrative reform of the Church and the importance of “faith over reason,” themes that would assume great importance in Pole’s life. While at Oxford, Pole also became friends with Thomas More, and through More came to know Erasmus as well. From an early age, then, Pole was well-versed in the Erasmian reform currents of his time, both by training and through personal relationships.

---


3 Mayer, *Reginald Pole*, 47.


Upon finishing his studies at Oxford, and with the help of a stipend from Henry VIII (who seems to have been fond of him), Pole went to Padua, Italy, to receive “the best foreign education” in Europe.⁷ The University of Padua at the time was perhaps the most famous university in Europe, the center of classical humanist learning. At Padua, Pole became friends with Pietro Bembo, who was destined to become “the godfather of Petrarchism” in Italy in the sixteenth century.⁸ Through Bembo, Pole was introduced to Marcantonio Flaminio, also a poet of considerable renown and later a major force for evangelical reform.

Pole’s stay in Padua marked a turning point in his development, both in his personal orientation and in his social contacts. From this time Pole’s interests became increasingly religious rather than literary. But Pole’s religious orientation was always closely related to his friendships. Pole’s friends at Padua introduced him into the literary and religious society of Venice,⁹ which at the time was in the midst of the movement known as the Oratorio of Divine Love, a group of men dedicated to administrative reform and spiritual renewal in the Church. Through the Padua-Venice connection, too, Pole met and became friends with Gasparo Contarini, then a Venetian diplomat and member of the Council of Ten that governed Venice.¹⁰ Contarini would become a major influence on Pole and something of a guiding light to the spirituali over the next decade. Indeed,

---

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ As we have seen, Bembo was also a significant influence upon Vittoria Colonna.

⁹ Padua at the time had been “absorbed” in the Republic of Venice and its University had become the principal training ground for the Venetian elite.

many spirituali came together through the Paduan connection. It was here that Pole met Giovanni Morone, Giacopo Sadoleto, and Pietro Martire Vermigli (Peter Martyr), all of whom were to play important roles among the spirituali.

It was at Padua-Venice, too, that Pole met Gian Pietro Carafa, founder of the Theatines, who was destined to become Pole’s greatest antagonist. Although Pole long considered him a close friend and expressed the “warmest affection” for Carafa, the feeling does not appear to have been mutual. In a famous and oft-quoted phrase, Carafa wrote that he “could not understand Pole because Pole would not let himself be understood.” The statement is both an accurate description of the complexity of Pole’s character and a harbinger of the deep divisions that would come to characterize the relationship between Pole and his friend and adversary, Carafa.

Pole’s Defense of the Unity of the Church

At the end of 1528 Pole returned from Italy to England, where Henry VIII intended that he repay the financial support he had shown him by undertaking a career in the King’s service. Henry enlisted Pole’s support in “the King’s great matter,” sending him on a mission to obtain the approval of the theology faculty of the University of Paris for the divorce from Katherine. The mission did not go well. Pole seems to have had particular difficulty with the “scholastics” who dominated the faculty, finding in them the

---

11 The statement was made in a letter from Carafa to Bishop of Verona Gianmatteo Giberti in 1533, quoted in Mayer, Reginald Pole, 50, and in Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 29.

12 Mayer, Reginald Pole, 49.
antithesis of the humanist scholars who had trained him. He may also have had personal difficulties with the mission itself, as Pole was far from fully committed to the King’s cause, and his doubts would only grow. Nonetheless, Pole (together with other members of the mission) did succeed in obtaining a favorable opinion on the divorce from the Sorbonne faculty.

In 1535, after Pole had left Paris to resume his studies in Padua, his friend Thomas Starkey, acting on behalf of Thomas Cranmer and presumably Henry VIII, asked Pole to express his opinion of Henry’s divorce and marriage to Anne Boleyn, as well as on the King’s position as “Supreme head of the Church of England” after the passage of the Act of Supremacy. Pole’s response was a long book, couched in the form of a letter to Henry, entitled Reginald Poli Cardinalis Britanni pro ecclesiasticae unitatis defensioni, libri quator, known commonly as De unitate, or in English, “Defense of the Unity of the Church.” To say the least, it was not what Henry hoped for. On the contrary, De unitate is a virulent attack upon Henry’s presumption in “usurping” the role of the Pope as the descendant of St. Peter, especially since Henry’s act was prompted by

---

13 For a lengthy account of Pole’s difficulties in Paris, see Mayer, Cardinal Pole in a European Context (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 870-891.

14 Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 29. To state that the University issued a “favorable opinion on the divorce” is not precisely accurate. What the University did was issue, on July 2, 1530, a decision that the Pope had no authority to grant Henry a dispensation to marry his brother’s (Arthur’s) wife, Katherine of Aragon. W. Schenk, Reginald Pole: Cardinal of England, 25. If the papal dispensation was invalid, then Henry’s marriage to Katherine was also invalid (being incestuous). And if Henry’s marriage to Katherine was invalid, then he was free to marry Anne Boleyn and did not need a “divorce,” since there would be no valid marriage to dissolve.

15 Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 38; Mayer, Reginald Pole, 58.

16 Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 39 1n.
“his burning with passion for the love of a girl.”17 The work is striking both for the violence of its language and for its resort to numerous rhetorical devices to construct an almost prophetic assault upon the King’s position. Pole is quite personal in his attacks on Henry, including a long diatribe in which he accuses the King of “murdering” Pole’s uncle (George, Duke of Clarence) because he had a superior claim to the throne.18 That Pole would include his royal lineage as part of his attack on Henry’s actions underlines the importance that Pole attached, and would continue to attach throughout his life, to his aristocratic rank as part of his identity.

More important for purposes of the spirituali, however, is the way that Pole’s De unitate frames its support for the Church. While Pole sees the Church’s authority is conferred by Christ’s gift of the “keys of the Kingdom” to Peter, he does not defend the Church’s authority as being part of the “great chain of being,” a hierarchical system of steps proceeding from God down to the lowest being on Earth. Rather, the Church’s authority begins with Peter’s “knowledge” of Christ’s identity “entirely infused into his soul by God.”19 It is through Peter’s reception of Christ that the Church obtains its authority. The Church, then, is the recipient of God’s supernatural grace, “the faith enlightened by the divine Spirit surpassing nature.”20 The “dogmas of the Church” stand

17 Pole’s book was written in Latin. It has been translated into English by Joseph G. Dwyer and published as Pole’s Defense of the Unity of the Church (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1965). The quoted passage appears on page 184. All remaining citations to De unitate are from Dwyer’s translation.

18 Ibid., 196.

19 Ibid., 111.

20 Ibid., 327.
above those of men only because the Church is animated by “the spirit of Christ,” not because Christ has conferred upon Peter authority superior to that of kings.

Cutting through the rhetoric and invective, De Unitate can be seen as expressing Pole’s early understanding of the importance of a direct relationship between man and Christ, where God acts to confer grace directly upon man. Man’s faith in Christ is what allows him to receive this gift and ultimately to be saved. The Church, to be sure, has an important, even critical role to play in the process, and man must not “abandon” the Church. But the Church, too, has received its authority only by virtue of its reception of God’s light. Thus, the Church is not an independent authority that confers spiritual “merit” through its sacramental rites. Rather, the Church exists to provide men with a “medium” of the “light of God’s word,” a light “more pleasant than all life.” Pole may or may not, at the time he wrote De unitate, have been familiar with the precepts of Juan de Valdés, but the heart of De unitate expresses a view of the relationship between man and God that is completely consistent with the teachings set forth in Valdés’ Beneficio.

Widely circulated in manuscript even before it reached Henry VIII, Pole’s De unitate caused a sensation both in England and on the Continent – not because of its inherent theology, but because it drew a sharp line between Henry and the Church as Pole recognized it. Henry summoned Pole to return immediately to England, a summons which Pole ignored. Pole’s brother Lord Montague denounced him, and his own mother

---

21 Ibid., 326.
22 Ibid., 329.
wrote him that God should either lead him to serve his prince or “call him home.”

The reaction in Italy, of course, was precisely the contrary. Pole had become something of a hero to those in the Church, even a “martyr” on the order of Thomas More. In August of 1536 (three months after the issuance of De unitate), the Pope requested Pole’s presence in Rome “to consult about the general council and England.” Pole embarked on his journey, accompanied in due course by Gianmatteo Giberti, Marcantonio Flaminio, and even Carafa.

*The Commission to Reform the Church*

Soon after arriving in Rome, Pole was sought out by his old friend Contarini, recently installed as a cardinal, to be part of a commission that the Pope had put together to study reform in the Church. In December of that same year the Pope made Pole a Cardinal, an appointment which he apparently “reluctantly accepted.” Though now a Cardinal, Pole was not yet ordained as a priest, and would not take holy orders for a year or so. This in itself was not unusual, however, as Cardinals at the time were

---

23 Mayer, *Reginald Pole*, 44.

24 Ibid., 43. The “general council” was the movement towards convening a general council, which would ultimately become the Council of Trent.

25 Contarini had been made a Cardinal barely a year before, in May of 1535, together with five others including, interestingly, John Fisher who had been imprisoned by Henry VIII for opposing the king’s marriage. Gleason, *Gasparo Contarini: Venice, Rome and Reform*, 129.

26 Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation*, 42. This reluctance is confirmed by other historians. Dwyer notes that Pole had “ardently requested that he be spared” the “indignity” of becoming a Cardinal.” Dwyer, *Cardinal Pole’s Defense of the Unity of the Church*, xxv. Pole’s reluctance may have been prompted both by “a hesitancy to assume such tremendous responsibility,” as Dwyer believes, and a concern with the impact of the appointment on his family’s position in England.
thought of as more political and diplomatic figures than religious ones; many Cardinals, at that time, were not priests.\textsuperscript{27} 

Pole’s membership on the reform commission is significant for two reasons. First, it had important personal consequences. It cemented Pole’s relationship with Contarini, with whom he would remain close until Contarini’s death in 1542. It also brought him into continuous contact with Carafa, who was also a member of the commission. Indeed, Pole claimed that it was he who overcame Pope Paul III’s doubts about Carafa and succeeded in urging Paul to appoint Carafa as a Cardinal in 1537.\textsuperscript{28} Pole’s closeness to Carafa is again ironic in view of Carafa’s later antagonism.

The commission issued its report in 1537, the \textit{Consilium de emendanda ecclesia} (Plan for Reforming the Church). Although adopting what one writer has termed a “prophetic, even apocalyptic” tone in its presentation of the need for reform,\textsuperscript{29} the reforms it called for were administrative rather than doctrinal. The report began by decrying the corruption of an institution in which the Pope acts as a great feudal lord, dispensing the goods of the Church to his subordinates, who in turn profit from these benefits and from dispensing them to their own subordinates. It called for a sharp limitation on indulgences and benefices, and a requirement that bishops live in their dioceses. Cardinals were to be paid a fixed salary, rather than deriving their income from benefices, and were to serve a role akin to that of the Roman Senate, advising the Pope.

\textsuperscript{27} Contarini was not a priest either at the time of his appointment to the cardinalate. Like Pole, he took holy orders only after being made Cardinal. Gleason, \textit{Gasparo Contarini: Venice, Rome and Reform}, 132.

\textsuperscript{28} Mayer, \textit{Reginald Pole}, 45.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
Overall, the report’s view of the administrative role of the Church was very much in line with the view expressed by Pole in *De unitate*, of a “spiritual papacy…freed of the dubious financial transactions in which it had become enmeshed.”

By studiously avoiding doctrinal issues, however, the commission was able to gloss over or ignore a split within the reform movement that was eventually to cripple the spirituali. On the one hand, Contarini and Pole tended to view the need for administrative reform as inextricably linked with reform in Church doctrine toward a more “spiritual” approach. That is, eliminating the corruption attendant to the Church’s existence as a feudal state meant creating a more spirit-centered Church, and this directly implied that the doctrinal importance of “the economy of salvation” needed to be replaced by a theology based on a personal relationship between man and God. On the other hand, for Carafa the need to reform the Church meant to purify it, not only of its lax moral and financial practices, but also of its doctrinal ambiguities. Thus, for Carafa and his supporters, administrative reform implied greater spiritual discipline, with clearer statements of doctrine and a greater vigilance against heresy.

As it happened, the administrative reforms advocated by the commission were stoutly resisted by the curia and were not adopted by Paul III. The division between administrative reform and doctrinal reform was ignored and put off until it would be raised again over the course of deliberations in the Council of Trent. It is doubtful that

---


31 Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation*, 43.
either Pole or Contarini was aware of the extent to which this divide would affect them in the future.32

The Regensburg Colloquy

The doctrinal divisions that were papered over in the Consilium soon became apparent as a result of the “Regensburg Colloquy.” Convened by the Emperor Charles V in April of 1541, its goal was to see whether the doctrinal differences between Lutherans and Catholics could be resolved so that some sort of unity could be restored to the Church. It was headed by Contarini on the Catholic side and Melanchthon on the Protestant. By the end of May, to the surprise of many, the parties were able to agree on four critical points, the most important of which was the doctrine of justification. The position adopted by the parties was the doctrine of “double justification,” or duplex iustitia, which had been developed by Contarini based upon work by Erasmus.33 Under this justification doctrine, there are two types of justification: the first, what Luther called an “imputed justification,” comes directly from Christ and from him alone; the second, sometimes known as “inherent justification,” consists in a tendency which God has implanted in the souls of all men, by which man inherently yearns toward justification and through which men can “co-operate” with God’s grace through works of charity.34

32 There are no papers in existence as to the deliberations of the commission prior to the issuance of its report, and therefore it is not known whether members of the commission ever discussed the issue of doctrinal reform so as to elucidate the differences among the members. The fact that Pole apparently met with Paul III to urge him to promote Carafa to Cardinal during the very time that the commission was meeting suggests that he was unaware of the sharp differences between him and Carafa on doctrinal issues. See Mayer, Reginald Pole, 45.

33 The work was Erasmus’ Repair of Christian Unity. Dickens, The Counter-Reformation, 104.

The formula thus left room both for justification by “faith alone” and for an “active” faith which moves toward justification through good works. For Contarini, which type of justification is prior to the other was a “useless scholastic disputation” and need not be discussed.35

The *duplex iustitia* formula agreed upon by Contarini and Melanchthon was supported by the *spirituali*, who saw it as a virtual embodiment of Valdés’ teaching.36 Pole wrote Contarini that the Colloquy’s statement on justification “agreed with scripture” in every respect.37 Yet Pole failed to come directly to the support of the formula, absenting himself from Rome at the time that the formula was being heatedly discussed within the *curia*. It seems that Contarini was deeply troubled by Pole’s lack of direct support, and Pole’s reticence seems to have been the cause of some distance between the two.

In the event, the Contarini-Melanchthon formula was rejected by both the Catholics and the Lutherans. In Rome, Carafa was adamant that it was unacceptable. To him it relied upon “cleverly-spun” phrases that might be “capable of a Catholic interpretation” but would be interpreted differently by the Protestants.38 Others in the

---


36 In *Beneficio*, Valdés (while not formally describing two types of justification) wrote that men who “are called and drawn by God [imputed justification] to the grace of the gospel make Christ’s righteousness their own [inherent justification].” See Chapter One, n. 21.


38 Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation*, 56.
“accused Contarini of having betrayed the truth on justification.”

Ironically, Luther had almost the same reaction but on the opposite side, calling the formula “a thing of vagaries and patches” which could be interpreted differently by each side and which therefore failed to express the truth. The Regensburg formula was thus doomed almost as soon as it was announced. Its demise can be seen as a major setback for the spirituali cause, in that it made peace between Protestants and Catholics extremely unlikely and gave further impetus to the ongoing process by which each side was drawn into doctrinal rigidities that would ultimately lead to the Church’s complete rejection of Valdés’ ideas.

The “Church at Viterbo”

In August 1541, as Contarini was departing Regensburg to argue for his formula in Rome, Pope Paul III appointed Pole legate to the patrimonium Petri (papal patrimony) in Viterbo, with Pole taking up residence there in September. With apparently few official duties to take up his time, Pole set about inviting a group of his closest friends – poets, humanists and churchmen – to join him. The model for Pole’s circle was the religious circle established by Peter Martyr Vermigli in Lucca as well as that established by Vittoria Colonna in Rome. As we have seen, Vittoria Colonna moved to Viterbo almost immediately in order to become part of Pole’s circle, which became known as the

---


40 Ibid., 59.

41 Mayer, Reginald Pole, 113.


ecclesia vituriensis, or “Church of Viterbo.”

Cardinals Bembo and Morone also arrived, as did, importantly, Marcantonio Flaminio.

The “Church of Viterbo” soon became the principal center of spirituali activity and thought. Flaminio seems to have organized many of the discussions of the group, which centered on both the Pauline epistles and various Protestant tracts. The Italian scholar Massimo Firpo claims that Flaminio “meant to convert Pole’s household into the foremost Valdesian cell in Italy.” Whether this is true or not, it is clear that it was at Viterbo that Valdés’ signature work, the Beneficio de Cristo, was written, reworked and edited, ultimately to be published in 1542 and 1543. Later suspicions about the spirituali and their beliefs focused heavily on the activities of the group at Viterbo.

1542 – The Year of Living Dangerously

But while the creation and activities of the “Church of Viterbo” seem on the one hand to represent the culmination of the spirituali movement in Italy, on the other hand events were transpiring that would rock the spirituali to their very core. In July of 1542 Pope Paul III took the remarkable step, apparently at the urging of Carafa, to reinstitute

---

42 Brundin, Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian Reformation, 47.

43 Ibid, 122-23; Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 90-91. Fenlon notes that Flaminio introduced Vittoria Colonna to a copy of Valdés’ commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans, as well as directing Carnesecchi to both Bucer’s commentary on Romans and Luther’s writings on Psalms.

44 Cited in Mayer, Cardinal Pole in a European Context, 115.

45 Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 74-88. Fenlon (74) quotes P.P. Vergerio, a contemporary (1549) “witness,” as saying that the second edition of the Beneficio, published in Venice, sold some 40,000 copies in that city alone, an extraordinary level of popularity in that time.
the Inquisition at Rome. The Inquisition’s brief was to insure “the internal control of the church and its hierarchy” through the extirpation of heresy. Paul III appointed Carafa as head of the Inquisition, and although he balanced out the appointment with others who were more tolerant of heterodox beliefs, Carafa’s leadership was critical. Carafa maintained that “heretics must be treated as heretics…speaking gently and permitting certain favors to them…is the way to make heretics grow more obdurate and to increase their number daily.” The establishment of the Inquisition and its entrustment to Carafa would soon have a significant impact on the spirituali.

On August 24, 1542, Contarini died, a death attributed by some to his “broken heart” as a result of the complete failure of his mission at Regensburg. His death came as both a shock and a deep disappointment to the spirituali at Viterbo, as Contarini was a close friend of many (especially Pole) and was viewed as the standard-bearer of the spirituali cause. Certainly the spirituali had lost the best-placed and most prominent advocate of tolerance toward Protestantism and the importance of justification by faith. Without him, the spirituali had no one of sufficient stature to counteract the hardening attitudes of many in the Church against those sympathetic to Protestant ideas.

---

46 The Inquisition was established by the Papal bull Licet ab initio on July 4, 1542. William V. Hudon, Marcello Cervini and Ecclesiastical Government in Tridentine Italy (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992), 195.

47 Ibid., 117.

48 Letter from Carafa to Clement VII, quoted in Gleason, Reform Thought in Sixteenth Century Italy, 59.

49 Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 59.
That hardening can be seen in the activity of the Roman Inquisition, which almost from the moment of Contarini’s death began to direct its attention toward members of the spirituali. The body opened a processo, or file, on Carnesecchi, in 1542, and Carafa was said to be looking into the activities and written work of Vittoria Colonna. In August of 1542 Bernardino Ochino, Vittoria Colonna’s long-supported Capuchin preacher and virtual spokesman for Valdés, received a summons to return to Rome. Although the summons was directed as a request to meet with the head of the Augustinian order, Ochino understood it as a summons to the Inquisition. After meeting with Peter (Martyr) Vermigli, Ochino determined to reject the summons and flee to Switzerland, soon to be joined by Vermigli. The two would never again return to the Church.

The dual “apostasy” of Ochino and Peter Martyr Vermigli put the members of the “Church of Viterbo” “on the spot.” Colonna was a well-known supporter of Ochino, and Pole was close to both. Now that Ochino and Peter Martyr were admitted “heretics,” the suspicions of the Inquisition were naturally drawn to the other spirituali to determine which of them might be tainted with the same stain. The Inquisition began to look at the

---

50 Robin, *Publishing Women*, 161. Carnesecchi was investigated again in 1546, and would be investigated in earnest in the 1560’s, a process that ultimately led to his execution as a heretic in 1567.

51 Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation*, 73; Jane Wickersham, *Rituals of Prosecution: The Roman Inquisition and the Prosecution of Philo-Protestants in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 109. A processo was also opened on Vergerio in 1544, and a summons to trial was formally served on him in January of 1546.


53 Ibid., 131.
members of the Viterbo circle “minutissimamente,”\textsuperscript{54} examining “Flaminio and the others who are at Viterbo with the cardinal of England.”\textsuperscript{55}

Pole, at least, was well aware of the danger involved and took steps to protect himself and his friends. Ochino had sent a letter to both Pole and Vittoria Colonna on August 22 stating that he had decided to leave the Church rather than “preach Christ in a masquerade and jargon.”\textsuperscript{56} Pole reacted by turning over the letter to Cardinal Marcello Cervini, a papal legate but also a commissioner of the Inquisition,\textsuperscript{57} and advised Vittoria to do the same.\textsuperscript{58} Vittoria “hastened” to comply with Pole’s advice.\textsuperscript{59} The obvious intention was to demonstrate to the Inquisition Pole’s and Colonna’s good faith and intentions not to follow in the steps of either Ochino or Peter Martyr Vermigli. Thenceforth, both Pole and Colonna would have to be on their guard as to what they read, said and wrote, as would other members of the Viterbo circle.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{54} In the most minute detail.

\textsuperscript{55} Mayer, Reginald Pole, 132.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 131-32.

\textsuperscript{57} Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 73. To be fair, as Fenlon himself notes, Cervini was not then a member of the Inquisition, and did not become one until 1545 or 1546. Hudon, Marcello Cervini, 121. Fenlon takes this fact as supporting a conclusion that by having Vittoria send a letter to Cervini, Pole was not intending to alert the Inquisition. However, Cervini’s interest in the “extirpation” of heresy was well known, so that Pole would have understood that once the letter was in Cervini’s hands he would likely use it to inform the then-members of the Inquisition. Hudon, 120-22.

\textsuperscript{58} Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 73.; Mayer, Reginald Pole, 133; see also Adam Patrick Robinson, The Career of Cardinal Giovanni Morone (Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 56.

\textsuperscript{59} Mayer, Reginald Pole, 133.

\textsuperscript{60} Fenlon and others have seen the events of 1542 – the almost simultaneous death of Contarini and apostasy of Ochino and Peter Martyr Vermigli as “the passing of an epoch in the fortunes of the spirituali. Henceforward, Carafa and the Inquisition were in the ascendancy at Rome.” Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 52. Thomas Mayer has
and Peter Martyr (and the resultant attention of the Inquisition) thus had a significant chilling effect on the ability of the *spirituali* to promote their views in the open.

*The Council of Trent*

If the events of 1542 produced a decline in the influence of the *spirituali*, the Council of Trent would constitute the definitive blow to the group’s aspirations. In February of 1545, Pole was appointed, together with Cardinals Cervini, Del Monte, Morone and Carafa as papal legates to the council of Trent, which would convene only one month later. Pole, Del Monte and Cervini were designated as co-presidents of the Council.61 Pole’s arrival in Trent was delayed by some three months, however, as he had learned of a plot by Henry VIII to hire a group of Italian agents to assassinate him en route. Although there is considerable evidence that Pole’s fears were justified, he arrived safely in Trent in May.

Pole began his service at Trent by sending a long letter to both Cervini and Del Monte in which he set out his goals and intentions for the Council.62 He began with an outline of his views of the Church itself, which he defines as deriving its authorities not from princes or councils, but rather from the “promises of Christ to Peter,” a view very

---

61 The listing of the three names is remarkable. Cardinal Giovanni Maria Ciocchi Del Monte would become Pope Julius III, succeeding Paul III in 1550 in a conclave in which Pole would fall one vote short of being elected. Cervini would succeed Julius III, becoming Pope Marcellus II in 1555, but presiding a scant six months before he died. His successor would be Cardinal Carafa, who would become notorious as Pope Paul IV.

62 The letter is entitled *De concilio liber* (On the free Council). For a complete and detailed discussion of Pole’s letter, see Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation*, 100-115. The formula used by Pole was “Iustus enim, ut inquit Sapies, in principio sermonis est sui accusator,” that is, the just man is the first to accuse himself of guilt.
much like the one he advanced in *De unitate*. He also continued to seek reconciliation with the Protestants. To that effect, he advised that both the Pope and all councilors should “confess their guilt” as sinners before God, in order to receive His grace and open the way to reconciliation. Pole thus simultaneously signaled his awareness of the importance of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, where all men must “recognize their sinfulness” in order to be accounted just in the eyes of God. But, tellingly, Pole then proceeded to define man’s response to God’s grace in a way that would have pleased both Contarini and Valdés: it is a “faith that operates through charity” (*fides…quae per caritatem operator*). 63 That is, man is justified through faith alone, but that faith is demonstrated through works. Works are thus not of an independent value, but (to use Valdés’ word), the “fruit” of man’s justification by faith.

While Pole’s letter to Cervini and Del Monte could have formed a veritable platform of the *spirituali* goals for the Council, he never was able to put it into action. After the Council formally convened in December of 1545, Pole spent only six more months at Trent, during which time, in Dermot Fenlon’s phrase, “he displayed no very striking gift for action.” 64 He did issue, in January of 1546, an address to the delegates on behalf of the papal legates, in which he expressed again the need for the Church to acknowledge its own “guilt” for the “evils that beset her,” among which he counted “heresy, war, and the decline in ecclesiastical discipline and morals.” 65

---

63 The phrase seems to have been taken from Erasmus. Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation*, 108.

64 Ibid., 116.

65 Ibid., 119.
In April of 1546, however, the legates suggested in a report to Rome that the Council should take up the doctrines of original sin and justification.\(^6^6\) This it seems to have done in May of 1546. At roughly the same time Pole began to absent himself from meetings, complaining of an illness that Cervini described as “a deep and continuing pain in his left arm.” Pole wrote the Pope requesting leave to depart Trent in order to tend to his health, which the Pope quickly granted. After a brief address in which he urged the delegates to be tolerant of heretics and their views,\(^6^7\) Pole left Trent on June 28. He would never return.

In Pole’s absence there was virtually no representative of the *spirituali* to argue for their views in the Council. Control of the Council was left in the hands of Cervini who, as I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, held views on justification that were very different from Pole’s and those of the other *spirituali*. Voting on the language of the decrees, moreover, was by the delegates themselves, the majority of which were Dominican or Franciscan scholastics with long traditions of doctrinal thinking on justification, which they were not about to abandon to Erasmian or Valdesian upstarts.\(^6^8\)

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 123.

\(^{67}\) Mayer, *Reginald Pole*, 152. According to Mayer, Pole wrote that Lutheran views, for example, should not be addressed by the facile language, “Luther said that, therefore it is false.”

\(^{68}\) Hubert Jedin, the first great historian of the Council of Trent, states that the Council included a “conference” of “bishops who were also trained theologians” to develop the doctrinal decrees. “Its members had a definitive vote in the general congregations and on account of their authority as theologians they were able to turn the scale in that assembly.” Hubert Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1957), 2:294. Pastor states that the “theologians present at the first session” of the Council included six Dominicans, ten Franciscan Observants, eight Franciscan Conventuals, five Augustinian Hermits, as many Carmelites, and four Servites,” as well as four secular priests (not affiliated with an order). The Dominicans and Franciscans thus constituted 24 out of 42 members. It is significant that Dominicans and Franciscans comprised over half of the conference. Both the Dominicans and Franciscans had developed detailed and sophisticated doctrines of justification, sanctifying grace, and the
Thus, after considerable debate and revision, the Council issued its decree on justification in January of 1547. The decree is entirely consistent with the theology of justification developed by the scholastics.69

For the *spirituali*, however, the decree could only be seen as a resounding defeat for their principles. While affirming that justification was from God alone, the decree viewed justification as an ongoing *process*, rather than a single transformative event as the Lutherans held.70 The decree divided justification into three stages. In the initial stage of justification, man receives God's "justifying grace."71 In the second stage, humans “co-operate” with God’s grace through the justifying grace they have received. In this stage it is both possible and “necessary” for humans to keep the law of God; through such “good works” they “increase in righteousness.”72 However, all humans remain liable to sin and can forfeit justifying grace through grievous sin. This creates the need for the third stage of justification, in which humans “recover” the justifying grace; in order to do so, they *must* receive the sacrament of Penance.73 Thus, justification is a process of “co-operation” between God’s grace and man’s own works. Indeed, in most nature of merit.


70 According to Luther, man is justified “not by pieces but in a heap.” Dickens, *The Counter-Reformation*, 40.

71 The first stage of justification is detailed in chapters 1-9 of the decree. McGrath, 339. To this point, it is largely consistent with the principles of the *Beneficio*. The concept of justifying grace is principally a Dominican doctrine, having been developed in detail by no less an authority than Thomas Aquinas himself. Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*, 2:194; Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation*, 187.


cases man cannot be justified by faith alone; he must resort to works, specifically the sacrament of Penance and acts of charity.  

Effectively, the articles on justification provide a definitive rejection of the teachings of Valdés, whose *Beneficio* looked upon justification as a single act, from which good works necessarily flowed. Thus, Valdés does not mention the sacrament of Penance at all. The faith of the justified man will necessarily continue to draw him toward Christ, without resort to any “self-exerted” acts that can be viewed as “self-justification.” While good works naturally follow justification, they are not necessary to it. The broader definition of “faith” espoused by Valdés is antithetical to the rigid sacramental structure set forth in the articles of the decree on justification.

Not only did the decree on justification effectively reject the concept of justification set forth in the *Beneficio* of Valdés, the “canons” which follow the articles definitively closed the door on any hope that the spirituali may have had concerning reconciliation with the Protestants. One by one, the canons specifically condemn the doctrines advanced by Luther and Calvin, including their positions on free will and justification. In this respect, the declarations of the Council on justification must be viewed as not only a “clarification” of Catholic orthodoxy on justification, but also as something of a line in the sand explicitly distinguishing orthodox Catholic doctrine from “heretical” Protestant teaching. There could no longer be any hope that the Council

---


76 Ibid., 88. According to the *Beneficio*, “piety is the fruit of justification”; justification is not the fruit of piety.
would be a means to “keep the door open for the return of Protestants to the church,” as Contarini and Pole had hoped. Thenceforward the world would be irredeemably divided into “us” and “them.”

The Council’s decree on justification and the accompanying canons were understandably viewed as a great “disappointment” by the spirituali. Pole, while clearly “unhappy” at the decree, seems to have expressed his views only reluctantly. From his friend Priuli’s villa in Treville (over 200 miles from Trent), to which he had repaired from the Council, he wrote Morone of his concerns over the tenor of discussions in the various drafts of the decrees. At the same time he refused to return to Trent to take direct action, despite being urged by Rome to do so. In September of 1546 the Council issued a final draft of the Decrees on Justification, and Pole was explicitly ordered to state his views on the draft. In his comments, Pole did declare his objections to a number of specific points of the Decree, particularly on Articles V and VII. It is apparent that Pole was “dismayed” at the Council’s affirmation of good works as necessary to salvation, and at the tenor of the decrees that put equal emphasis on man’s co-operation through grace with the process of justification.

77 Hudon, Marcello Cervini, 74.


79 Ibid., 76.

80 “Priuli” is Avilse Priuli, usually described as Pole’s secretary and close friend for more than 20 years. Pole frequently stayed at Priuli’s villa in Treville, going back at least to 1535. Thomas Mayer argues at length that Pole and Priuli were “married,” in a relationship that was probably what we would now call homosexual. Mayer, Reginald Pole, 442-450. Whether this is true or not is beyond the scope of this paper, although it would explain, in part, Pole’s distancing himself from his relationship with Vittoria Colonna.

81 A complete discussion of Pole’s objections appears in Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 161-173.
Once the Decree on Justification was issued in January 1547, Pole turned his attention to delaying its formal adoption by the Council or its acceptance by the papacy. In this he was ultimately unsuccessful. Following the failure of his efforts at delay, Pole would acknowledge his acceptance of the decree. This has led several historians to conclude that Pole ultimately “supported the Council’s view on salvation.” Yet the nature of his approval is sufficiently ambiguous that others have questioned whether Pole truly accepted the positions set forth in the Council’s decrees.

*Almost Pope*

In the years following the conclusion of the first session of the Council of Trent, Pole counseled other members of the *spirituali* to be cautious about expressing their views on justification and salvation. He is said to have advised Vittoria Colonna to “believe as if her salvation depended upon faith alone and to act, on the other hand, as if it depended upon good works.” He equally advised caution to Flaminio and to his friend Cardinal Morone. The apparent contradiction between the beliefs and actions of the *spirituali* during this time were sufficiently well known that they prompted Calvin to describe them derisively as “Nicodemites,” a reference to Nicodemus who visited Christ only at night.

In 1549, however, events transpired to offer the *spirituali* a final opportunity to regain their influence: Paul III, who had both promoted Church reform and accepted the

---


83 Pole’s expression to Colonna was first reported by Carnesecchi in his trial for heresy by the Inquisition in 1557. It has been quoted by many historians. The quote here is from Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation*, 96.
relatively strict doctrines of the Council on justification, died suddenly. The leading
candidate to replace him was, to all appearances, none other than Reginald Pole. Pole
had the support of the Emperor’s contingent in the papal conclave of 1549-50, the
Emperor seeing him as a voice for peace with the Protestants. On the first scrutinium
(straw ballot) he received more votes than any other candidate, although short of the
number needed for election. In a series of further votes his candidacy continued to gain
support, and on December 4, 1549, he attained 24 of the 28 votes needed for election.
That night Cardinal Cervini stated that he would add his vote to Pole’s tally, but only if
Del Monte did so first. Pole began to draft an acceptance speech. However, at the next
day’s polling Pole garnered only twenty-six votes. Del Monte never rose to give his
assent, leaving Pole effectively one vote (Del Monte’s) short of election. Though his
candidacy remained alive for several weeks thereafter, support for Pole gradually waned,
especially after a group of French cardinals joined the conclave to offset the votes of the
Emperor’s party. In January the papacy went to Del Monte, Pole’s “co-president” at the
Council of Trent and the very man who had failed to rise to give his assent to Pole. Del
Monte took the name Julius III.

The failure of Pole’s papal candidacy effectively ended any hopes the spirituali
might have had to exert a meaningful influence on Church reform or Church doctrine.

---


85 This assumes that if Del Monte had voted for Pole, Cervini would have followed suit as
promised, making twenty-eight. The movement of support for Pole, first building and then waning, is
recounted dramatically by Mayer in Cardinal Pole in a European Context, IV-8-11. Mayer states that “any
number of schemes” would have produced the twenty-eighth vote had Del Monte assented. Ibid., IV-10.
Pastor claims that three cardinals, Morone, Cesi and Gaddi, had told the French “party” that they would add
their votes if and when Pole achieved 26 votes; while Morone voted for Pole, the other two did not. Pastor,
The History of the Popes, 13:15.
Pope Julius III was no Contarini, and lacked either the energy or the spiritual zeal of Paul III. His main interest seems to have been to enjoy his luxurious papal villa in Rome while disturbing the Church’s hierarchy as little as possible.\textsuperscript{86} Under Julius III’s benign neglect the Inquisition drew new strength and “began to move” against the *spirituali*, targeting the associates of both Pole and Valdés.\textsuperscript{87} The hour of the *spirituali* had passed.

In August of 1553 Pole was dispatched by Julius III as papal legate to England, where Mary Tudor had become queen. Pole would be appointed by Mary as Archbishop of Canterbury, the last Catholic to hold that post. After Julius III died in 1555, the subsequent election of Petro Carafa as Pope Paul IV effectively ended Pole’s influence in the Church, at least in Rome. For the next several years, as he undertook the administration of Queen Mary’s Roman Catholic Church in England, Pole came under continuous scrutiny by the Roman Inquisition. Pope Paul IV summoned him back to Rome in October of 1557, an invitation which Pole knew meant facing charges from the Inquisition. He declined to leave England, and died in November, 1558.

*Conclusion*

Reginald Pole was in some ways the epitome of a Renaissance man. Equally at home in English, Latin and Italian, knowledgeable in Greek and Hebrew, his classical learning and spirituality were such that he could have rivaled Erasmus as spokesman for Catholic Evangelism in Europe. He became the personification of the hopes of the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[86] The *Catholic Encyclopedia*, expressing probably the kindest view of Julius III, says that “he spent most of his time in ease and comfort [at his villa], occasionally making a weak effort at reform in the Church by instituting a few committees of cardinals for reformatory purposes.” *Catholic Encyclopedia* Online, s.v. “Julius III,” accessed October 25, 2013, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08564a.htm.

\item[87] Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation*, 244.
\end{footnotes}
spirituali, bringing many of them together in his “Church of Viterbo,” and serving as spiritual mentor to more than a few (including both Marcantionio Flaminio and Vittoria Colonna). Yet he ultimately failed in all his purposes. He was unable or unwilling to support Contarini in his attempt to reconcile with the Protestants at Regensburg. He failed utterly at Trent, absenting himself from the proceedings of the Council and allowing the Council to issue decrees on justification which effectively crushed all the goals of the spirituali. And as close as he came to being elected Pope, ultimately he failed at that, too. The nagging question remains: how did it, how could it happen?
CHAPTER FIVE
THE FAILURE OF THE SPIRITUALI

In examining the lives and fortunes of Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo and Cardinal Pole, we have seen that the three great geniuses, together with other spirituali, failed utterly to advance their principles within the Church, and equally failed to provide for any opening of the Church to Protestant views. This failure occurred despite their enormous literary and artistic talent and their access to the highest levels of Church authority. The questions remain: how and why did they fail? In examining these questions, I rely on the framework established by Morton Deutsch in his work, The Resolution of Conflict.1 Deutsch distinguishes between two types of conflicts: destructive and constructive. He defines a destructive conflict as one where a large number of “its participants are dissatisfied with the outcomes and feel they have lost as a result of the conflict.” A constructive conflict, by contrast, is one in which “the participants all are satisfied with their outcomes and feel that they have gained as a result of the conflict.”2

By these criteria, there is no doubt that the conflict over the evangelical movement in the Catholic Church, led by the spirituali, was a destructive conflict. The goals of the spirituali were definitively repudiated by the Council of Trent and its aftermath: the doctrine of salvation “by faith alone” was effectively vitiated by a

---

2 Ibid., 17.
formulation for justification that relied heavily on works, particularly acts of Penance, and which wholly preserved the “economy of salvation” that the spirituali disdained. Any possible opening toward the Protestants was closed by a rigid declaration that condemned all significant Protestant principles as heresy. Where a group seeking to promote change fails in all its goals, the conflict that produced the failure can only be described as destructive.

Deutsch identifies seven “variables” that determine whether a conflict is constructive or destructive. Three of these played critical roles in the failures of the spirituali: (1) the characteristics of the parties in conflict (their values and motivations; their aspirations and objectives; their physical, intellectual and social resources for waging or resolving conflict; their beliefs about conflict…); (2) their prior relationship to one another (their attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about one another, including each one’s belief about the other’s view of him…); and (3) the consequences of the conflict to each of the participants. While Deutsch’s remaining four variables have some bearing on the conflict between the spirituali and those who sought to advance a different vision of the Church, I believe that the first three largely account for the failures of the group as a whole, and of the Colonna-Michelangelo-Pole contingent in particular.

To begin with, the personal characteristics of the spirituali limited both their desire to reach out to others of different views and their effectiveness in moving others toward their own view. Colonna, Michelangelo and Pole were three highly idiosyncratic,

---

3 Ibid., 5. The other four variables listed by Deutsch are (4) the nature of the issue giving rise to the conflict (its scope, rigidity, motivational significance, formulation…); (5) the social environment within which the conflict occurs; (6) the interested audiences to the conflict; and (7) the strategy and tactics employed by the parties in the conflict.
complex, and even “difficult” personalities whose personal interactions sought to avoid 
negotiation, almost at any cost. On the one hand they would act deliberately to provoke a 
conflict and then withdraw from it (in the case of Michelangelo and, to a lesser extent, 
Vittoria Colonna); on the other hand, they would avoid dealing with the conflict entirely 
and respond from a distance (in the case of Reginald Pole). These were not 
characteristics likely to lead to their meeting the other side halfway, or to achieving a 
solution that gave something to both sides.

Second, the *spirituali* as a group, and our three participants in particular, were 
wholly constrained by their own aristocratic class and its humanist background. This 
meant that their personal relationships with each other were more important to them than 
their relationships with anyone they viewed as not being “one of us.” In the cases of 
Colonna, Michelangelo and Pole, all three saw themselves as aristocrats and intellectuals, 
and they were able to communicate best with each other and with others who shared 
those characteristics. Their relationships with those who had a lower aristocratic 
background, lacked a humanist education, or who were not otherwise receptive to their 
views on salvation were markedly more difficult and less successful.

Third, the consequences of success or failure were much less important to the 
*spirituali* than they were to their adversaries. Their beliefs were such that if the *spirituali* 
failed in moving the Church toward their views, they could always withdraw to 
concentrate on their own personal relationship with God. Their adversaries, on the other 
hand, needed the Church’s “economy of salvation” both to justify their positions and to 
validate their purpose in life. Thus, while the *spirituali* could withdraw to their own
private circles after seeing their principles defeated, or at least thought that they could, their opponents knew they could not afford to lose. Given the disparity of consequences for the two sides, a “constructive” resolution of the conflict, in which everyone achieved something, may not ever have been possible.

The Other “Participants” in the Conflict

Before attempting to analyze the failures of the spirituali according to Deutsch’s criteria, it is helpful to identify the “other participants” to the conflict. Historians in the 1970’s and 1980’s sought to portray the spirituali as confronting an equally focused group of adversaries, whom they variously described as the “intransigenti” (intransigent ones) or the “zelanti” (zealots), who were determined to oppose the goals of the spirituali at every turn. More recent scholarship has cast doubt upon this polarity of roles, pointing out that many of the “intransigenti” shared common backgrounds with the spirituali, were sometimes close friends with them, and held at least some of the same goals.4 Nevertheless, the fact remains that the spirituali were seeking to change both the doctrines and the institutions of the Catholic Church, and in order to do so they had to work with and convince those who did not fully share their views. From the point of view of conflict analysis, these other interests may be termed the spirituali’s “adversaries,” in the sense that they pursued goals and perceived consequences of success and failure that were quite different from those of the spirituali.

The interests that the spirituali had to overcome may be grouped into three broad categories. First, there was the papal-curia group, the curia being the members of the

---

Pope’s “court.” The curia is sometimes viewed as a separate group pursuing its own selfish interests, but ultimately the principal goal of its members was to advance the interests of the papacy and the papal bureaucracy. Pope Paul III is sometimes viewed as being torn between a desire to reform the Church and a desire to secure papal power, but in the end his highest priority was to retain as much authority as he could. Cardinal Marcello Cervini, the principal Papal legate to Trent, was deeply committed to the Pope and would do nothing that would in any way compromise his master’s position.

Second, there was the group of “scholastic theologians” who were educated under the Aristotelian-Thomist educational method that began in cathedral schools of the twelfth century and came to full fruition in university theology faculties throughout Europe. These “scholastics” had developed detailed and highly sophisticated doctrines on such issues as faith and justification. Many of the superiors-general of the “regular orders,” particularly the Franciscans and the Dominicans, were steeped in the scholastic method. The scholastic method had been the object of great scorn in among the humanist “academies” that had sprung up from Northern Italy to Holland and England, stressing the need for the student to confront both classical and biblical texts directly and personally. But the scholastics, despite being on the “losing side of history” in the long run, were particularly prominent at Trent, and their doctrines were treated with great respect by Pope Paul III as well as by his legates Cervini and Del Monte.

Finally, there were those in the Church who were concerned with the importance of “extirpating heresy,” viewing the Lutheran and Calvinist movements in the states north of the Po river as constituting the gravest of threats, not only to the Church as an
institution but to its role as the determinant of truth. These “heresimachs,” as they might be called, are most sharply personified by Cardinal Gian Pietro Carafa (later Pope Paul IV), whom one historian has called a “nasty inquisitor” and “eminently hateable.”

But while Carafa stands out for his intransigence and vehemence, he in fact reflected (if only in an exaggerated way) the views of a considerable element within the Church, which deemed it essential for the Church to clarify what precisely was orthodox and what was heretical – in essence, to spell out explicitly what the Church stood for – in order to resist the dangers of the Protestant Reformation.

How the *spirituali* dealt with – through confrontation or negotiation – these three interests within the Church would ultimately determine whether their views succeeded or failed.

*Personal Characteristics of Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo and Reginald Pole*

Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo and Reginald Pole were all very complicated personalities. In Colonna’s case, she was a person of great warmth and charm, but subject to an obsessive attachment to men who she believed shared her views. Her first religious attachment was directed toward Bernardino Ochino, whom she would follow around northern Italy, attending his sermons and participating in his group discussions. The attachment was so close and so well known that when Ochino fled Italy for Switzerland she was immediately suspected of heresy herself. Even before Ochino’s apostasy in 1542, however, Colonna had turned her attention to Reginald Pole, moving to

---

5 Ibid., 794. The spelling is Hudon’s.

6 As discussed in Chapter 2 above, after Ochino was “proven” to be a heretic (by renouncing the Church and fleeing to Rome), Cardinal Carafa’s Inquisition opened a file on her.
Viterbo in 1541 in order to be in daily contact with him and to become part of his Ecclesia Vitubiensis. Her closeness to Pole provoked disparaging comments from other members of the spirituali and eventually caused Pole to withdraw from her.

Colonna’s obsessiveness manifested itself, too, in an extreme concern with self-abnegation in order to demonstrate her spiritual focus. As we have seen, she would so “afflict herself with fasts, sackcloth, and other mortifications of the flesh that she had reduced herself to skin and bone…”7 This behavior prompted Pole to counsel her to moderate her behavior. It also seems to have caused others to look upon her as something of a religious hysteric, and consequently to discount her entreaties for reform. In particular, Cardinal Cervini, who would become the key player at Trent, became quite critical of her.8

Michelangelo was another difficult character – indeed he was well-known as such. He has been called “erratic” and “sarcastic,” with a short temper.9 The “individuality of his character,” as even the most favorably-inclined critic has described it,10 led him to strong and even violent confrontations with his patrons, notably Popes Julius II and Paul III. Michelangelo’s pattern seems to have been to confront his patrons loudly, then to withdraw from the field, sometimes leaving Rome entirely and abandoning the project he was working on. If, as I have maintained, his last two frescoes in the Pauline Chapel were intended as a message to Paul III on the need for a reformed

---

7 See Chapter 2.
8 Hudon, Marcello Cervini, 119.
Church based on a direct relationship with God, then his many confrontations with Paul III would hardly have helped convince the Pope of the merits of his argument. In short, while Michelangelo could be both kind and generous, his confrontational manner did not lead to negotiation or persuasion of the kind that could mitigate conflict or turn it in a “constructive” direction.

But by far the most “flawed” character in the group, in his inability to negotiate his way to conflict resolution, was Reginald Pole. In his two great failures – at Trent and in the Papal conclave of 1549 – Pole demonstrated a complete inability to work constructively with those whose opinions he did not share. This can be seen most clearly in his behavior at Trent. At Trent, as we have seen (Chapter 4), Franciscans and Dominicans dominated the “working delegates” of the conference, constituting more than half of the “theologians” who were entrusted with reviewing and voting on the Articles related to justification.11 Both the Franciscans and the Dominicans were “scholastics,” the product of centuries of their orders’ teachings on the subject. In particular, both orders had developed their own doctrines of “justifying grace,” a grace that “resides” in the individual soul after the “initial” justification and that permits man to work (co-operatively with God’s grace) toward God after initial justification.12 These theologians were not about to abandon their long-standing and carefully nuanced doctrines to the relatively novel idea of justification by faith alone, at least as it was (in their view, inartically) expressed in Valdés’ *Beneficio*.

---


The scholastics at Trent were not about to be moved without a fight, or without considerable persuasion by someone who held to a Valdesian view of spiritual development. Yet, as we have seen, Pole made no effort to work with them to bring them round to his view. In the months that he was at Trent, Pole seems never to have met with the “theologians” to try to explain his beliefs to them or to sway them to his side. This lassitude may have been due in part to Pole’s disdain for “scholastics,” following his unhappy experiences with the various doctors of theology at the University of Paris while attempting to secure support for Henry VIII’s divorce. More likely, however, is that Pole was characteristically incapable of negotiating with those whose opinions he did not share. At one point he wrote that at Trent he felt himself “surrounded by men with whom he had nothing in common…neither country nor kindred; whose habits and customs, as he wrote, were mostly alien to him, and with few of whom he enjoyed any close friendship.”

Pole was well aware that the scholastic theologians at Trent were working toward a doctrine of justification that was inimical to his own. His reaction, however, was to avoid meeting with any of them to try to resolve their differences or even to understand their motives. He never contacted the theologians directly, in person or in writing. Rather, Pole reacted by setting forth his objections in a letter to Cardinal Morone, and then leaving Trent entirely. Thomas Mayer maintains that this type of conduct is typical

---


14 Ibid., 165-171.
of Pole’s “way to avoid conflict,” absenting himself from the field during a time in which personal negotiation was essential, and responding only afterward and in writing.\footnote{15 Mayer, \textit{Reginald Pole}, 105.}

Pole’s withdrawal from Trent, which Dermot Fenlon has attributed to “anxiety, and…something like a nervous breakdown,”\footnote{16 Fenlon, \textit{Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation}, 135.} left control of the Council almost exclusively in the hands of Cardinal Marcello Cervini, even though Pole and Cervini (and Del Monte) had been appointed co-presidents. Cervini was someone with whom Pole should have been able to work effectively. He shared Pole’s humanist education and love of classical works. Also like Pole, he saw the scholastics as being outdated -- overly restrictive in their thinking and unable to communicate their views effectively. Pole should have been able to build upon their common backgrounds and outlook to see to it that Cervini took the views of the \textit{spirituali} into account in the Council’s decrees on justification.

Yet Cervini did not share the \textit{spirituali}’s views. In particular, he was dismissive of the doctrine of justification by faith alone as espoused in the \textit{Beneficio}, saying that it failed “to distinguish among various stages of grace: how it is received, how it progresses and how one ought to persevere in it. He criticized the lack of attention in the book to the ‘other obligations’ given to Christians besides the obligation of faith.”\footnote{17 Hudon, \textit{Marcello Cervini}, 118.} In Pole’s absence, Cervini worked directly to frustrate the views of justification set forth in the \textit{Beneficio}. Acting virtually as sole “president” of the Council, Cervini flatly rejected an
initial draft of the doctrine of justification prepared by the Augustinian theologian Seripando, a draft which was substantially in accordance with Contarini’s “double justification” theory and the teachings of Valdés. Cervini then sent Seripando back to rewrite the decrees so that the various “stages” of justification were emphasized and the need for individual acts of Penance and other good works became essential principles of justification. Cervini was thus able to do precisely what Pole could not: to use his authority to cajole delegates of the Council to produce a decree that accorded with his views. Cervini’s character was such that he could fight to see his views through; Pole’s character was such that he could not.

Pole’s second great failure, at the Papal conclave of 1549-50, can equally be attributed to his character, specifically his unwillingness or inability either to confront his opponents or to negotiate with them seriously. Throughout the conclave, Pole steadfastly refused to “politic” or “engage in lobbying” on his own behalf. In one instance, when Cardinal Farnese (Pope Paul III’s nephew) tried to put forth a motion to have Pole declared Pope by acclamation, Pole adamantly refused support. More pointedly, on the morning of the day that the vote was to be taken that would leave Pole one vote short of election, Cardinal Carafa dropped a bombshell by rising to his feet and effectively accusing Pole of heresy, waiving “articles” that purportedly contained a list of Pole’s “errors.” Pole’s response was not to take Carafa seriously, “sometimes laughing and sometimes citing authorities from Holy Scripture.” In both cases, Pole effectively

---

18 Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 227.

refused to answer concerns specifically or to act effectively on his own behalf, either with his supporters or his adversaries.\(^{20}\)

Pole had once expressed great affection for and trust in Carafa, and the two seem to have worked together effectively in the commission to reform the Church in 1536-37. But by the time of the Papal conclave in 1549, their relationship had descended into bitter enmity. At one point the voting in the conclave effectively coalesced into two sharply opposed camps, one in favor of Pole and the other in favor of Carafa. Although Pole and Carafa did meet once in order to attempt to patch up their disagreements, Thomas Mayer makes clear that Pole was completely unable to disguise his “disdain” for Carafa.\(^{21}\) To be sure, Carafa was not a flexible negotiator either, seeing enemies everywhere and lacking the subtlety of mind to perceive compromise solutions. But Pole’s haughty reaction to Carafa’s attacks – taking them as personal “attacks on himself, not a matter of mere theological debate” \(^{22}\) -- made it impossible for Pole to garner support from Carafa or his supporters. Pole’s personality was such that the diversity of views between Carafa and himself became all-encompassing, dooming his candidacy. It is telling that the next three Popes to be elected were Del Monte (Julius III), Cervini (Marcellus II), and Carafa (Paul IV); all three had vastly outshone Pole at the conclave of 1549 in their ability to manipulate people and process to effectuate their goals.

**Prior Relationships: Class and Culture Trump Spiritual Belief**

\(^{20}\) According to Pastor, Pole steadfastly declared “to several Cardinals who urged him to take steps himself for the furtherance of his election, that he would say no word, even if his silence should cost him his life….” Pastor, *The History of the Popes*, 12:13.


\(^{22}\) Ibid., V-16.
Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo and Cardinal Pole were all aristocrats, or saw themselves as such, and shared a profound humanist education in the classics. Vittoria Colonna, as we have seen, was of the highest Roman nobility and had been well educated in the Latin classics, both literary and poetic. Pole was descended from Edward IV’s brother, and his mother was a peeress of England. He had studied the classics in depth at both Oxford and Padua. While Michelangelo’s lineage was nowhere near as high-ranking as either Colonna’s or Pole’s, he clearly saw himself as “an aristocrat, and [was] proud of his noble birth, seeing in it a special virtue.”23 Michelangelo’s classical education may have been less formal than Pole’s, but he had imbibed the classics at the hand of some of the most renowned humanists of his time. For all three persons, it seemed far more important to build relationships, meet and discuss matters with people who shared their background, education and outlook – than to reach out to those whose opinions may have differed from their own.

In Colonna’s case, her dedication to her family honor may have directly frustrated her ability to put her beliefs into effect. She had once enjoyed a close relationship with Pope Paul III, who had read her poetry with great admiration. In 1540-41, however, her brother Ascanio decided to oppose the Pope’s attempt to impose a salt tax on papal lands, which included several Colonna territories. The conflict soon assumed a military character, with Paul III’s armed forces actively besieging Colonna castles and seizing their landholdings. Vittoria decided that her duties to her family superseded her friendship with the Pope or her devotion to spiritual reform, and she effectively assumed

the role of Ascanio’s secretary of state, noting in a letter to him that “casa Colonna sempre è la prima” (the house of Colonna always comes first). Thus she became the principal representative of the Colonna family interests in the conflict with Paul III. Her actions in putting the Colonna family first essentially made it impossible for her to use her friendship with the Pope to further the goals of the *spirituali*, since any differences she might have had with Paul III on matters of doctrine had become intertwined with issues of personal conflict.

Michelangelo’s ties to his “aristocratic” background also impeded his effectiveness in promoting the *spirituali* cause. Although Michelangelo had long been the favored artist of Popes, only Clement VII (Giuliano de Medici), the Medici Pope whose table Michelangelo had shared as a boy of fifteen, was ever personally close to him. Michelangelo’s tempestuous relationships with Julius II (Giulio della Rovere) are well documented. He is reported to have thrown a timber at Julius II, and the Pope for his part is said to have struck Michelangelo with his cane. After both confrontations Michelangelo withdrew from Rome for some time. Of the three Popes for whom Michelangelo undertook artistic works (Clement VII, Julius II and Paul III), only Clement VII could be viewed as a true “aristocrat.”

---


26 Ibid., 372.

27 Ibid., 364.

28 Although Clement VII, Giulio de’ Medici, was the illegitimate son of Lorenzo’s brother Giuliano, he had been taken into Lorenzo’s household after his father’s (Giuliano’s) assassination in 1478 in the War of the Pazzi Conspiracy. Lorenzo had him legitimized and made him as much a part of the
the relationship between Michelangelo and Paul III could well have been due, at least in part, to Michelangelo’s seeing Paul III as not being “one of us.” It may also explain the rather direct tone Michelangelo took in his Pauline Chapel frescoes, which, as we have seen, can be viewed as a scolding of Paul III for his acceptance of the doctrines of the Council of Trent. This arguably high-handed approach was, to say the least, not productive in advancing the spirituali goals with the Pope.

But perhaps the greatest example of aristocratic prejudices impeding the effectiveness of the spirituali can be found in Reginald Pole. In his letter to Henry VIII of England, Pole adopted a haughty and almost insulting tone, implying that his own claim to the throne may have been superior to Henry’s; this could only have intensified Henry’s anger. At Trent, Pole was incapable of dealing with the “scholastics” who did much of the detailed work in drafting the canons on justification, seeing them as wholly inimical to the humanist and “personal” views of spirituality that had been developed by the teachers at his universities. In this respect he contrasts with Cervini, who, although sharing Pole’s contempt of the scholastics, was able to use them effectively to promote a decree on justification that accorded with his views.

When push came to shove, Pole seems to have admitted that the Council’s rigid doctrines on good works may have been necessary for the “common people” who lacked

---

Medici family as if he were his own son. By contrast Paul III, Alessandro Farnese, while well read in the classics, was the younger brother of Giulia Farnese, the courtesan mistress of Alexander VI (Roderigo Borgia). Unlike the Medici, the Farnese were not established aristocrats, but were granted Papal titles solely by virtue of Giulia’s relationship with Alexander VI. Paul III was often called “the petticoat Pope” as he achieved his status on his sister’s petticoats.

Michelangelo would hardly have been unaware that Paul III entered the hierarchy of the Church through the influence of his sister, Giulia Farnese.
his aristocratic background. As far back as the Proposal Concerning the Reform of the Church in 1537, which Pole had assisted in drafting, he noted that the Colloquies of Erasmus “contain many things inciting uneducated minds to impiety, [and] it should be forbidden to read them as well as other books of their kind in the schools.”\(^{30}\) In other letters, Pole seems to have expressed the view, as did both Contarini\(^{31}\) and Cervini, that “certain theological topics were to be preached in sermons before more educated audiences but to be avoided in sermons before more ‘common people’….\(^{32}\) Thus Pole could ultimately accept the need for the more rigid doctrines of the Council as being necessary to provide guidance to the “common people” on their road to salvation – even if he doubted the necessity of such guidance for educated aristocrats such as himself.

Finally, Pole’s aristocratic view of the world may have hampered his ability to perceive the extent and nature of the opposition to spirituali views among those who shared his background. This can be seen in his attitudes toward the spirituali’s two key adversaries, Marcello Cervini and Gian Pietro Carafa. Although not of noble ancestry, Cervini was from a family of landowners in Montepulciano whose vineyards produced the famed (then as now) Montepulciano wine. He studied at the University of Siena, where he excelled in “humanistic subjects,” particularly the Greek and Latin classics. He became personally acquainted with Pietro Bembo and other renowned Italian humanists,

\(^{30}\) *De emenda*, Article III, quoted in Gleason, *Reform Thought in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, 96.

\(^{31}\) Contarini appears to have believed in a “two-tier model of the Christian community, drawing a sharp horizontal line between the mass of believers and the educated elite of the church…..” Gleason, *Gasparo Contarini*, 268.

and as he rose through the ecclesiastical hierarchy amassed one of the largest collections of classical books, manuscripts and art in Rome.\footnote{Ibid., 22-26.}

Cervini was, then, someone with whom Pole could find many common interests, including literature, art and humanist philosophy. Pole naturally considered Cervini both a friend and an ally. But Cervini did not share the \textit{spirituali}’s views on justification by faith, considering that tenet to be “heretical.”\footnote{Gleason, \textit{Gasparo Contarini}, 269.} He also thought the \textit{Beneficio} to be a “confused” work, in particular that it “failed to distinguish among various stages of grace.”\footnote{Hudon, \textit{Marcello Cervini}, 118.} Pole never seems to have understood that someone who shared his love and profound respect for humanist culture would not also share his spiritual views. When Pole departed Trent, he left Cervini effectively in charge, apparently trusting him to produce a doctrine of justification that would be consonant with his own (Pole’s) views. In fact, Cervini used the opportunity of virtually total control to mold the Council’s decrees on justification into something quite antithetical to the views of the \textit{spirituali}.

Pole never seems to have realized the extent of the differences between Cervini and himself. Even after Cervini failed to come to Pole’s support in the papal conclave of 1549-50, Pole’s relationship with Cervini remained warm, and Pole enthusiastically and sincerely praised Cervini’s election as Pope Marcellus II in 1555.\footnote{Ibid., 154-55.} Pole’s trust in Cervini, as being one of “our kind of people,” blinded him to Cervini’s actions and made it impossible for Pole to try to persuade him to change his course.
Pole seems to have failed with Carafa in a similar manner. Carafa, although not of the nobility, had studied with Pole at Padua, and the two worked together on the commission to reform the Church. Pole thus saw him, as he saw Cervini, as a person of like education and interests to his own. Again, the affection which he clearly felt for Carafa may have blinded Pole for a time to the extent to which his views differed from Carafa’s on justification, or on the importance of “extirpating” the particular ‘heresy’ espoused by the spirituali. When Carafa’s views on the spirituali became manifest at the papal conclave of 1549 – with Carafa accusing Pole not only of espousing theological “errors” but also of “keeping heretics in his house” – Pole seems to have been genuinely shocked, taking the attacks as “direct attacks on himself.”

That someone he viewed as his friend would have attacked him in this manner seems to have been something Pole could not comprehend, far less work around. Pole’s “attitudes, beliefs, and expectations” of Carafa caused him to misunderstand the extent of Carafa’s opposition to his views, just as they had with Cervini.

The inability of the spirituali to break out of their narrow aristocratic circles proved to be a fatal flaw that Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo and Pole had in common. All three adamantly resisted reaching out to a wider public. Colonna, as we have seen, repeatedly refused or limited publication of her poetry. Michelangelo, horrified at the

---

37 Mayer, Cardinal Pole in a European Context, IV-16.

38 It may be somewhat unfair to blame Pole for his failure to reach any accommodation with Carafa, since it may ultimately have been impossible for Pole to have achieved anything approaching compromise with someone as rigid and combative as Carafa. Certainly Carafa displayed strongly paranoid tendencies, and one noted historian has characterized him as “to all intents insane during his pontificate.” G.R. Elton, Reformation Europe 1517-1559 (New York: Harper, 1963), 207. It is questionable whether such a man could have been expected to “reason together” with anyone he deemed an opponent.
criticism of his *Last Judgment* for its nudity, made sure that his remaining paintings were in the Pope’s private chapel, and then ceased painting entirely. And Pole reacted to the apostasy of Bernardino Ochino by refusing to support any further preaching directed toward large audiences, and urged Colonna to do likewise. In recoiling from publication of their work and views, the *spirituali* contrast sharply with the Protestant movements of Luther and Calvin in Northern Europe, both of which used printing as a highly effective means of communicating to a wider audience than that of their own cities or regions. The *spirituali* were simply unwilling to reach out to a larger audience, or incapable of doing so, owing in no small measure to their aristocratic sensibility.

**Disparity of Consequences**

For Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo and Reginald Pole the consequences of failure were substantially less than for their adversaries. Vittoria, once the Council of Trent had issued its declarations on justification in 1547, decided to “accept the Council’s judgement on the matter,” and ceased to promote the Valdesian teaching she had so energetically promoted in the past.  

39 Although the Inquisition did examine her activities as part of a *processo* against her friend Pietro Carnesecchi in 1547, she died later that same year and thus never had to answer for her “heretical” views. Similarly, after the Council issued its decrees, Michelangelo ceased painting and sculpting, continuing to work only as the Papal architect until his death in 1564. Although his *Last Judgment*  

---

39 Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation*, 213. In a letter to Cardinal Morone, Vittoria expressed her hope that Priuli, Pole’s secretary, would accept the Council’s judgment as she had done.

40 Ibid., 217-18.
increasingly was subject to criticism by puritanical elements in the years after 1547, this criticism did not result in any action by the Church against him.

Pole, to be sure, did suffer adverse consequences from the spirituali’s failure: his failure to be elected Pope in 1549 was in major part due to his reputation for heterodoxy, and he would later suffer from Inquisitorial scrutiny from 1553 to 1557. But in neither case does Pole seem to have understood that the consequences of his views might be severely detrimental to himself or his career.

Pole’s apparent lack of concern may be contrasted with the perceptions of both Cervini at Trent and Carafa at the Papal conclaves. Cervini’s seems to have understood quite clearly that the views of the spirituali represented an existential threat to his own position as well as that of the Church. For Cervini it was impossible to put forward a doctrine of a personal relationship with God, based on “faith alone,” without substantially weakening, or vitiating entirely, the need for an ecclesiastical hierarchy responsible for mediating between God and man (through the sacraments). Cervini could never accept the spirituali’s belief that it was possible to believe in justification by faith alone and at the same time submit to Church authority. Cervini was Pope Paul III’s effective servant and acted always to preserve the Pope’s and the curia’s authority. The consequence of accepting the spirituali’s position, in Cervini’s eyes, was nothing short of the eventual elimination of the need for the Church entirely.

Carafa’s view of the consequences of failure was similarly stark. What some have called Carafa’s “excessive suspicion of anyone he considered leaning toward

---

41 Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 227-281.
heresy”42 was, in fact part of a coherent expression of a need for discipline. Carafa’s
life’s work was the “purification” of the Church, and in this respect the Church’s
practices could not be distinguished from its doctrine. If it was necessary for the Church
to end “corrupt” practices such as benefices and simony, it was just as necessary to end
“corrupt” thinking. Church doctrine had to be clear and exclusive, and once it was
defined there could be no departing from orthodox teaching. Heterodox (or heretical)
thinking was as dangerous to the Church’s existence as morally lax behavior. Carafa
looked upon the views of the spirituali as every bit as threatening to the Church’s
purpose and existence as immoral behavior by clerics.

For Pole, and indeed for all of the spirituali, the moral or ideological
consequences of failure were nowhere near as dire as they would have been for their
adversaries. The essence of Valdês’ Beneficio, it must be remembered, was the personal
relationship between the individual and God. If the spirituali failed to move the Church
to accept their views institutionally, they could always fall back into their own
“individual devotion” – helped, of course, by their continuing personal support for one
another.43 Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo, and Pole all reacted to the failure of Trent
(and in Pole’s case, to the failure of his papal candidacy) by abandoning the fight and
withdrawing into their own circles. The mismatch between the “consequences of

42 Gleason, Reform Thought in Sixteenth Century Italy, 55.

43 Eva-Maria Jung, in her study of Italian Evangelism, wrote that one of the “principles” of
Evangelism was “a purely internal, individual devotion. The indifference to dogmas which started with
Humanism and survived in Evangelism was carried into practical indifference and hypocritical
of Ideas 14, no. 4 (October 1953): 519.
conflict” for the *spirituali*, on the one hand, and their adversaries on the other, lay in their personal relationship to God as much as in their personal fortunes.

**Conclusions**

The *spirituali* failed to move the Church toward a view of justification that depended on an individual’s “faith” in God alone. They failed equally to promote a Church that would be more open and receptive to the ideas of the Protestant north. The *spirituali*’s failures are rooted in three characteristics of their movement that, in Deutsch’s analytical framework, prevented them from obtaining a “constructive” resolution to the conflict between them and their adversaries. First, the personal characteristics of Colonna, Michelangelo and Pole were such that they were not able to enter into constructive dialogue with those who did not share their background and beliefs, whether they were the “scholastics” at Trent, doctrinaire thinkers such as Cervini and Carafa, or high-handed Popes such as Paul III. Second, the aristocratic sensibilities of the three prevented them from fully appreciating their adversaries’ intentions, and inclined them toward accepting the need for a Church doctrine that would require the performance of “good works” from the common people. Third, the consequences of failure were far less dire for the *spirituali* than they would have been for their opponents. In the event of loss, the *spirituali* could always fall back on the “individual devotion” that was the essence of their movement, whereas their adversaries had no such luxury. For their adversaries losing meant losing everything, while for the *spirituali* it did not. The conflict was so unequal it effectively meant the *spirituali* cause was doomed to fail.
CHAPTER SIX
THE END OF THE SPIRITUALI

Following the conclusion of the first session of the Council of Trent in 1547 the fortunes of the *spirituali* went into steep decline, as can be seen especially in the lives of Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo and Reginald Pole. Colonna died in Rome in February, 1547, unattended by Pole. Michelangelo arrived at her bedside shortly after she died, and Condivi reported that “nothing grieved him [Michelangelo] so much as that when he went to see her after she passed away from this life he did not kiss her on the brow or face, as he did kiss her hand.”¹ He mourned her death until he died some seventeen years later, dedicating numerous poems to her. According to Condivi, “recalling her death…he often remained dazed as one bereft of sense.”²

Michelangelo himself, as we have seen, went into virtual artistic isolation following Colonna’s death and the death of Pope Paul III in 1549. He continued to support himself only through his work as the Papal architect and never painted publicly again. Although Michelangelo was never placed under investigation or condemned by the Inquisition, the same cannot be said of his paintings. In particular his *Last Judgment* came under steady attack by those promoting censorship, being increasingly criticized both for the nudity and for some of the more unorthodox portrayals of religious figures. The last session of the Council of Trent, in 1563, explicitly required that “adjustments” be made to Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*, a decree with which Pope Paul IV (formerly

² Ibid.
Cardinal Carafa) was only to happy to comply. The Pope hired Michelangelo’s friend Danelle da Volterra to paint clothing over several of the more prominent nudes, and most of the “clothing of modesty” remains on the painting today.³ Michelangelo died in 1564, having enclosed himself within his studio and largely withdrawn from any public expression of his religious views.

Reginald Pole, following the failure of his Papal candidacy in 1549-50, returned to Rome, where the new Pope Julius III appointed him to several Papal commissions, one of which, ironically, was the Inquisition. Pole seems to have left the Inquisition in 1551, objecting to its “harsh manner of proceeding.”⁴ In 1553 Pole himself came under scrutiny by the Inquisition, and was asked to meet separately with several of its members, including Carafa. Pole’s meeting with Carafa appears to have led to a sincere reconciliation between the two, and may even have resulted in Pole’s abandoning some of the beliefs he held at Viterbo. Fenlon, at least, maintains that Pole “had suffered a correction” in his views on the doctrine of salvation.⁵ Mayer disagrees, noting that Pole left Rome for Lake Garda shortly after his meeting with Carafa; he ascribes Pole’s behavior to a new policy of “Nicodemism,” that is, pretending to be an orthodox Catholic in public while privately maintaining sympathy with Protestant views.⁶

---

³ Connor, The Last Judgment, 199.
⁴ Mayer, Reginald Pole, 192.
⁵ Fenlon, Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation, 248.
In July of 1553, Mary Tudor was proclaimed Queen of England, an event to which Pope Julius III (Del Monte) responded by almost immediately appointing Pole Papal Legate to England. Pole arrived in England in 1554. He soon became close to the young queen, becoming her chief advisor -- in effect, her chief minister. He worked closely to effectuate the “reconciliation” of England and the Church in November of 1554. In contrast to the lassitude he displayed at Trent and immediately afterward, Pole in England seems to have been a whirlwind of activity, working to restore some of the monasteries destroyed by Henry VIII and seeking to obtain compensation for the confiscation of Church property.\(^7\) He served as Chancellor of Oxford in 1555 and of Cambridge in 1555-56. On March 20, 1556, Queen Mary appointed him Archbishop of Canterbury.

Pole’s time in England is not without controversy, however, for among his other duties he effectively presided over Mary’s heresy trials, conducted after the passage of the Heresy Acts of 1555. Some, like Dermott Fenlon, ascribe to Pole full responsibility over the executions conducted under “Bloody Mary’s” campaign against heresy.\(^8\) Yet no less a figure than John Foxe, the sixteenth-century English “martyrologist” who wrote a wildly-popular book lionizing the deeds of England’s Protestant “martyrs” under Queen Mary,\(^9\) absolved Pole of much of this responsibility, noting that Pole went to great lengths to absolve many of those tried and to mitigate the sentences of others. Thomas

---

\(^7\) Mayer, *Reginald Pole*, 283-288.

\(^8\) Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Reginald Pole and the Counter Reformation*, 252.

Mayer largely sides with Foxe, arguing that Pole acted in “remarkably lenient fashion” with regard to both procedure and outcome in the heresy trials.¹⁰

In 1557, things changed suddenly and much to Pole’s disadvantage. His old adversary Carafa had become Pope Paul IV in May of 1555, and one of the new Pope’s major initiatives was the “re-invigoration” of the Inquisition. Under Paul IV’s continuous direction, the Inquisition quickly turned its glare on two of the principal spirituali, Pole’s close friend Cardinal Giovanni Morone and Pole himself. In April of 1557, Paul IV withdrew Pole’s papal legation to England, a move that was resisted by Queen Mary and her council.¹¹ On May 31 Pole’s friend Morone was arrested by the Inquisition and imprisoned in the Castel Sant’Angelo. Several historians have claimed that the Inquisition had prepared a processo against Pole, and certainly Paul IV seems to have prepared more than one such dossier on him. Pole himself seems to have believed that a dossier had been opened against him.¹² However, Thomas Mayer asserts that his research in the archives of the Holy Office divulged no formal processo against Pole. Still, Morone was formally charged in October of 1557, and although ultimately cleared on charges of heresy, he refused to leave Castel Sant’Angelo until the Pope publicly acknowledged his innocence. He remained in prison until Paul IV’s death in 1559.

Pole remained in England as Queen Mary’s archbishop of Canterbury, head of the Church in England and Mary’s closest advisor until 1558. But he was without authority from Rome. In fact, in June of 1557 the Pope sent a letter to Mary formally recalling

¹⁰ Mayer, Reginald Pole, 277.
¹¹ Ibid., 311.
¹² Ibid., 334.
Pole to Rome, presumably to face the Inquisition. Mary demurred, and Pole, aware of the proceedings against Morone and himself, began drafting a series of letters to the Pope in his defense. Inasmuch as there was something of a war going on between the Pope’s military forces (allied with those of France) and those of Spain (allied with England through Mary’s formal marriage to Philip II), the Pope dithered and Pole remained in England, uncertain as to whether he should return to Rome to face trial or remain where he was.

In September of 1558 Pole became ill, the victim of an epidemic that was sweeping England. Indeed, he and Queen Mary became ill on the same day and died on the same day, November 17. Pole’s body was taken to Canterbury and he was buried on December 15, the day after Mary’s funeral. Although the Inquisition was never able to get its hands on him, neither was Pole able to succeed in his last mission. With Mary’s successor Elizabeth restoring Protestant rule in the Church of England, Pole’s mission to England in the end proved to be as much a failure as his attempt to resist Henry VIII, to provide for a renewed and open Church in the Council of Trent, or to be elected Pope.

Pole’s death marked finis to the spirituali movement. Contarini had died in 1542 while Ochino and Vermigli were Protestants-in-exile. Vittoria Colonna was also dead, as was Pole’s and Colonna’s friend (and leader of the Viterbo ecclesia) Marcantonio Flaminio. Cardinal Morone was in prison, as was Carnesecchi, at the behest of the Inquisition. While Morone would ultimately be released from prison and exonerated by the new Pope Pius IV following the (merciful) death of Paul IV in 1559, Carnesecchi would return to prison in 1565 and be beheaded and burned the following year. The
movement did not survive the deaths of its members. The “Counter-Reformation” was well underway and the Catholic Church reinforced its traditional dogmatism and observances. The *spirituali* had failed completely.
CONCLUSION

In the end, the spirituali proved unable to survive the death, exile or withdrawal of their most renowned members – Contarini, Vittoria Colonna, Reginald Pole, and Michelangelo. Despite the efforts of Colonna and Michelangelo to use their art to promote the Valdesian ideals of a personal relationship with God centered around the gospels, the Church had definitively rejected their goals and virtually silenced their voices. The efforts of Colonna and, more prominently, Pole, to create circles of influence to further their views within and without the church shattered against what would become a wall of Church doctrine and bureaucracy, seen most chillingly in Carafa’s (Paul IV’s) Roman Inquisition and papacy.

In Deutsch’s terms, the spirituali failed because they were incapable of creating or unwilling to create the conditions for a “constructive conflict” that would allow them to achieve some or all of their goals without negating the goals of those allied against them. Their failure was both personal and cultural. As we have seen, on a personal level Colonna, Michelangelo and Pole were all highly artistic personalities who seemed incapable of the more mundane tasks of negotiation with their adversaries, whether their adversaries consisted of the “scholastic” theologians of Trent or the deft politicians of the curia.

On a cultural level, the spirituali were fatally constrained by the narrow prejudices of their aristocratic backgrounds. Reginald Pole would not or could not reach out to the scholastics at Trent largely because he could not see the merit in engaging with
what he viewed as their petty concerns. At the same time, both Pole and Colonna were so convinced of the natural co-operation of those they considered to be “one of us” – Cervini, and even, to an extent, Carafa – that they failed to perceive the extent to which those same people would, left to their own devices, work to undermine and thwart the spirituali’s efforts.

Deutsch’s third “variable” for determining the success of a “constructive” conflict, the consequences of failure, also effectively served to frustrate the spirituali. Failure for Colonna, Pole and Michelangelo meant retreating to their villas or workshops and withdrawing from public promotion of their ideals. On a religious level, the personal nature of their faith meant that they could fall back on “Nicodemism,” maintaining private evangelical beliefs while publicly accepting the rules set by their Church. Their opponents had no such luxury. The scholastics at Trent, Cervini at Trent, and Carafa at the Papal conclave of 1549 (and later as Pope Paul IV), simply could not afford to lose in the way the spirituali could. The consequences of allowing the spirituali to succeed would, in the view of their opponents, have led to a fatal weakening of the administrative and theological magisterium of the Church – as well as to their own demise.

Eva Maria Jung, in her seminal article “On the Nature of Evangelism in Sixteenth-Century Italy,”¹ listed three “essential characteristics of Evangelism” in Italy; (1) “it is undogmatic”; (2) “it is aristocratic”; and (3) “it is transitory.”² All three characteristics served, in terms of Deutsch’s variables, to create a “destructive conflict” in

---

² Ibid., 520.
which the *spirituali* were practically doomed to fail. Looked at from Deutsch’s analytical framework, it hardly seems to have been a fair fight.


