



Pope Joan

by Andrew Matzner

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One of the great scandals of the Middle Ages and Renaissance revolved around John Anglicus, an Englishman who was said to have lived in the ninth century. Settling in Athens, John became well-known as a scholar. At some point, he made his way to Rome, where his reputation as a learned man grew. Eventually, John was made a cardinal, and in 855 C. E. was elected pope following the death of Pope Leo IV. Three years later, in 858, Pope John VIII (as he was designated) was riding in a procession making its way from St. Peter's to the Lateran. Suddenly, the pope halted by the side of the road and, to the shock of those watching, proceeded to go into labor and give birth. Thus it was that Rome discovered that Pope John VIII was really a woman.

The story of Pope Joan, as she was popularly renamed, captured the imaginations of Europeans for hundreds of years. It seemed like an incredible saga--a woman passing as a man who reaches the top of the Church hierarchy. But was it true? Was there really a female pope?

Significantly, the surviving records of contemporary medieval historians of the ninth century do not record such an event. However, several hundred years later reports about a female pope began surfacing.

The main source for the life of Pope Joan is found in the writings of the medieval Polish historian, Martin von Trappau. In a document dating to 1265, he relates the story of a young woman who dressed as a man in order to accompany her male cleric lover first to Athens, then to Rome. Passing as the opposite sex and calling herself "John," she thereby gained access to the Church's educational system. A gifted student, John managed to become a great teaching master of the liberal arts. With the death of Pope Leo IV (847-855), the citizens of Rome pushed for her to assume the title, which she did in 855. John continued to have sexual relations while pope, which led to her becoming pregnant. She then unexpectedly delivered her child while proceeding down a street between the Coliseum and St. Clement's church.

Von Trappau reports that after John's deception was discovered, she was killed by the crowd. She was buried near the very street on which she was traveling, which is why from then on popes never again traveled down it.

Other versions of the Pope Joan story give different time periods for her tenure as pope. For example, Jean de Mailly, another thirteenth-century author, dates her ascension to 1099. He also offers more detail regarding her death. He writes that after she gave birth, enraged onlookers attacked the pope, bound her feet, hooked her to the back of a horse, and stoned her to death as she was dragged down the street.

An alternate version of the story has Joan retiring in shame to an isolated convent, while her son grows up to become the Bishop of Ostia.

While official Vatican lists of the popes do not include any mention of a female pope, it appears that the story was widely believed by the general public by at least the thirteenth century. Indeed, the collection of busts of popes in Siena Cathedral once included one of Pope Joan. However, as the Renaissance progressed,



A Tarot card depiction of Pope Joan as the Antichrist astride the seven-headed beast of the apocalypse. This depiction was likely created as Protestant anti-papal propaganda.

both Catholic and Protestant historians began questioning the veracity of Pope Joan. Besides noting that mention of Pope Joan does not appear until hundreds of years after her death, historians have also pointed out that there is ample evidence for male popes sitting during those years supposedly filled by Pope Joan.

Today, the Roman Catholic Church does not recognize Pope Joan. Nevertheless, she does have her believers. They argue that an embarrassed medieval Vatican worked hard to expunge mention of a female pope from contemporary documents. Supporters also believe that it is difficult to say one way or another what might or might not have happened during the European Dark Ages, a period of time marked by social chaos.

In an interesting footnote to the Pope Joan story, tarot card commentator Rachel Pollack notes that there is a connection between female popes and a late thirteenth-century Italian group known as the Guglielmites. Its members were convinced that Guglielma of Bohemia, who had founded the group but died in 1281, would return from the dead in 1300. They believed that his rise would usher in a new era in which women could be popes. Anticipating this turn of events, the group elected a woman named Manfreda Visconti to be their first female pope. However, the Guglielmites suffered the wrath of the church, who viewed their actions as heretical, and in 1300 Manfreda was burned at the stake.

Significantly, it was Manfreda's family, the Viscontis, who, one hundred and fifty years later, commissioned the first set of Tarot cards. And among those cards was an unnamed image of a woman that became known as "The Papess." Today this card is titled "The High Priestess." It provides visual testimony of a desire to integrate femininity into a Christianity that has always officially been male-oriented.

Quite apart from the question of its veracity, the persistence and popularity of the story of Pope Joan witness to the fascination (and fear) inspired by "passing women." Moreover, the fate of Pope Joan is illustrative of the severe punishment that, until quite recently, women who crossed gender lines by taking on the clothing, work, and social roles of men (sometimes even marrying women) often faced when they were exposed as women.

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