

ONE:
 POLITICS AND POSSIBILITIES



When the difficult conclave of 1774–5 ended with the election of Cardinal Braschi as head of the Church, it was a choice of which the Sacred College could be proud. The new pope (Fig. 1) – young, handsome, and deliberately moderate – seemed just the man to restore prestige and stability to the office brought to its nadir under the late Clement XIV. Despite his calculated modesty, Braschi embraced the task. In the words of one observer, he seemed born to be a sovereign.¹

The situation of the Holy See, however, was anything but propitious. During the next quarter century, Pius VI faced mounting attacks on political, territorial, theological, procedural, and philosophical grounds. His predecessor's dissolution of the Jesuit Order had removed one of the papacy's key lines of defense and left the Church bitterly divided. While Catholic sovereigns consolidated their power at the pope's expense, Enlightenment philosophers questioned the very notion of revealed religion. All of Europe seemed aligned against Rome, as a Venetian observer made clear:

La Francia intraprende tutto;
 La Spagna fa niente di tutto;
 L'Inghilterra combatte contro tutto;
 L'Imperator s'approfitta di tutto;
 La Russia bilancia tutto;
 La Grecia vuole niente di tutto;
 Il Re di Prussia guarda tutto;
 Il Portogallo si cava di tutto;
 La Turchia ammira tutto;
 L'Olanda paga tutto;
 Il Papa teme tutto;
 Se Dio non ha pietà di tutto,
 Il diavolo si porterà via tutto.²

PAPACY AND POLITICS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ROME



1. Giuseppe Ceracchi, *Pius VI*, marble, 1790. Genoa, Palazzo Bianco, inv. MSA 3633 (photo: Archivio Fotografico del Settore Musei del Comune di Genova)

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[France undertakes everything, and Spain does nothing; England fights everyone, and the Emperor profits; Russia considers everything, and Greece wants none of anything; the King of Prussia watches everything, and Portugal survives everything; Turkey admires everything, and Holland pays for everything; the pope fears everything; if God does not take pity on everyone, the Devil will take it all away.]

As if these external challenges were not enough, Pius had inherited one of Europe's most economically backward states, with little to guarantee its continued viability. The papal government, although progressive in aspects of social policy, was corrupt and inefficient, while the nation as a whole depended on foreign imports for basic subsistence. These practical and theoretical conditions, combined with Braschi's formation and mental makeup, shaped his artistic policies. This chapter examines those conditions, the person of Gianangelo Braschi, and the historical events that molded and ultimately ended his pontificate.

BRASCHI'S BACKGROUND AND ELECTION

Giovanni Angelo Braschi was born on Christmas Day in 1717 in the Romagnan town of Cesena near the northern border of the Papal States. The first of eight children born to Count Marcantonio Braschi and Anna Teresa Bandi, he inherited an ancient title but modest fortunes; despite their noble Swedish ancestry and six centuries in northern Italy, by 1717 the impoverished Braschi were of purely local significance. Demographically, Gianangelo was thus typical of post-Reformation popes: of noble but not grand parentage from ever-smaller towns within the Papal States.³ In the year of his birth Gianfrancesco Albani of Urbino (Clement XI, 1700–21) occupied the papal throne, and the Church was reeling from its defeat in the War of the Spanish Succession. Spain had seized the northern papal fiefs of Parma and Piacenza, while Imperial troops lingered nearby in Comacchio. Clement's anti-Jansenist bull *Unigenitus* (1713) had led to mass excommunications in Paris and would not be registered by *parlement* for another seven years. At home, the papacy's finances were in shambles, its military weakness decisively exposed. As historian Owen Chadwick wrote of Clement's reign, "more calamities happened to the papacy during this pontificate than under any Pope since the Reformation." The aftermath must have affected young Gianangelo Braschi while setting the tone for the entire settecento.⁴

For a minor nobleman like Braschi, the Church remained the surest path to success, and Gianangelo enjoyed a particularly rapid rise. After studying with the Jesuits in Cesena, Braschi graduated as Doctor of Laws at the tender age of seventeen before pursuing his legal studies at the University of Ferrara. There he received his first taste of nepotism, securing through the influence of his

maternal uncle a position as private secretary to Tommaso Ruffo, Clement XII's Cardinal Legate. Braschi accompanied Ruffo to Rome in 1740 for the tortuous conclave of Benedict XIV, where he observed curial politics firsthand. Thereafter Braschi remained in the Roman orbit, becoming Ruffo's auditor for Ostia and Velletri when Ruffo became dean of the Sacred College. As well as gaining valuable administrative experience in this service, Gianangelo earned the personal gratitude of Charles III of Bourbon for valor during the Austrian invasion of 1744. This connection brought him to the attention of the new Pope Benedict XIV (Prospero Lambertini, 1740–58), who employed him in negotiations with Naples. Benedict's enlightened, eighteen-year pontificate marked Braschi's maturation as a churchman. Lambertini's open personal style, reforming impulse, and progressive intellectual circle set a model Gianangelo would long remember.

Ruffo died in 1753, the year Benedict named Braschi as his personal secretary and offered him a canonry at St. Peter's. It was this offer, apparently, that made Braschi drop his marriage plans and assume Holy Orders at the age of thirty-nine. In 1758 he was appointed referendary of the Court of the Segnatura, and the next year he became auditor for the new cardinal camerlengo Carlo Rezzonico, nephew of the recently elected Clement XIII (Carlo Rezzonico, 1758–69). Cardinal Rezzonico was instrumental in securing Braschi's appointment in 1766 as general treasurer of the Apostolic Chamber, an important post he held for the next seven years. This gave Braschi his closest view yet of the Church's troubled finances, which he tried in vain to restore to order. His conduct in office – despite the obvious temptations – was unimpeachable.⁵ By this point Braschi's rise was unstoppable. The post of treasurer led, as usual, to his creation as cardinal in 1773 by Pope Clement XIV (Lorenzo Ganganelli, 1769–74; Fig. 2), due more to Bourbon influence than to the pontiff's personal favor. In fact Braschi's temperament and politics were opposed to those of Clement XIV, an enlightened but weak-willed friar who alienated members of the Curia by disregarding their counsel and capitulating to the enemies of the Jesuits. Braschi's conservative sympathies were closer to those of his mentor Clement XIII, who had vigorously upheld the papacy's traditional rights (and the Jesuits) despite heavy pressure from Portugal, France, Spain, and Naples.

In such a climate Cardinal Braschi's influence was soon diluted, and forces upset by his financial scrutiny saw that he received only the minor titulus of Sant'Onofrio and the commendatory abbacy of Subiaco, both with notably meager revenues. But Braschi plunged into his new duties with enthusiasm, personally touring Subiaco's outlying parishes and convents until the mountain roads became impassable with ice and snow. Gianangelo shone as this downtrodden district's new protector, which showcased his administrative energy. As unorthodox proof of his devotion, Braschi retained the abbacy even as pope, the better to shower Subiaco with practical and artistic adornments.⁶ Clement XIV's suspicious death on 22 September 1774 thus found Cardinal Braschi in Subiaco, sidelined from the most

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2. Giovanni Volpato after G. D. Porta, *Clement XIV on Horseback near Lake Nemi*, etching, 1773 (photo: ING)

recent controversies in the capital. Ganganelli had become increasingly eccentric and reclusive, and his death was shrouded in scandal; rumors flew that Jesuits seeking revenge had poisoned him. Papal finances, meanwhile, were in chaos, thanks to his kleptomaniacal ministers. “At the death of Clement XIV,” wrote the Imperial Agent Brunati, “the affairs of the Holy See were in complete confusion – the inevitable result of the Pope’s neglect of business and the fickleness and caprice of his little band of incompetent and unscrupulous favorites, who had control of everything.”⁷ The papacy, in sum, had reached a low point.

The overarching issue of the new conclave remained the Society of Jesus, which had become a litmus test of Church politics. Founded as Counter-Reformation foot soldiers in direct allegiance to the pope, the Jesuits stood in

the way of the political and religious consolidation sought by enlightened monarchs and parliaments who chafed at Roman authority. More specific objections were advanced, including charges of personal immorality, excessive leniency with sinners, interference in local politics, advocacy of tyrannicide, and meddling in colonial trade. One by one, the Catholic powers had expelled the society from their European and overseas dominions – Portugal in 1759, France in 1764, Spain in 1767, and ultimately Naples and Parma. Now pawns in Europe’s undeclared war against Rome, the Jesuits’ fate was sealed.⁸

After decades of mounting pressure from Spain and the Bourbon courts, Clement XIV dissolved the order with his brief *Dominus ac Redemptor* of 16 August 1773, confiscating their possessions worldwide. The victors, although pleased, were determined to prevent a backlash. The duty of the Sacred College in 1774–5 was thus to select a candidate who would uphold the dissolution but still be acceptable to those *zelanti* cardinals who resented outside influence on the Curia and wished to see the Jesuits restored. It was a delicate situation that required candidates to walk a tightrope. Braschi, one of the two most junior cardinals at the conclave, was a true dark horse, emerging only at the last minute as the *zelanti*’s compromise choice. Led by the Cardinal Dean Gianfrancesco Albani and Chamberlain Carlo Rezzonico, this group secured the French and Spanish representatives’ support after assuring them that their candidate would not reinstate the Jesuits. Austria’s instruction to avoid Braschi at all costs arrived too late. Francesco Milizia put the situation more bluntly, explaining to his friend Count Francesco di Sangiovanni in April that Braschi had been elected “for being one of those most opposed to Ganganelli, with whom most of the cardinals were entirely disgusted. The kings ran to him by necessity, and for fear of something worse.”⁹ In short, Braschi had succeeded in convincing both sides that he would act according to their wishes – or at least (in the case of the *zelanti*) that his personal sympathy for the Jesuits would alleviate their suffering and prepare for an eventual restoration.

BRASCHI’S CHARACTER

Despite vicious satires on the endless conclave, Braschi’s election was widely viewed as a new dawn for the Church. Rome longed for a savior, and Braschi seemed to fit the bill. Milizia called him a *papone* of magnificent appearance, majestic carriage, and fluid eloquence, while Cardinal Bernis wrote to Louis XVI that the pope-elect gave every impression of being “an honest man, full of courage, firmness, prudence, and moderation.” Still, Bernis warned that the office itself could change a man’s character, and only time would tell whether Braschi’s appealing image was “his face or his mask.”¹⁰

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Braschi's personal charisma was undoubted, and both his youth (barely fifty-seven years) and his "athletic temperament" distinguished him from his predecessors. The new pope liked to take exercise in public view, and the Scottish physician John Moore observed in 1775 that he "went through all the evolutions of the ceremony with an address and flexibility of body, which are rarely to be found in those who wear the tiara." Moore also noted the pontiff's good looks: "His features are regular, and he has a fine countenance; his person is straight, and his movements graceful. His leg and foot are remarkably well made and always ornamented with silk stockings, and red slippers, of the most delicate construction." Pius was not immune to these charms, accentuating his abundant snow-white hair, dark eyes, and fine figure at official appearances. It is said that during his coronation at St. Peter's the pope cunningly lifted his gown to display a well-turned ankle. Rome's "talking" statue Pasquino retorted with the stinging couplet:

Aspice, Roma, Pium. Pius! haud est: aspice mimum
 Luxuriante comâ, luxuriante pede.

[Rome, look at Pius. Pious! Hardly. Look at the clown, delighting in his hair, delighting in his leg.]

Moore excused Braschi's vanity by noting that women swooned whenever he went out; when one young admirer shouted from a window, "Quanto è bello! O quanto è bello!" an older lady responded, "Tanto è bello, quanto è santo!" As Moore put it, "When we know that such a quantity of incense is daily burnt under his sacred nostrils, we ought not to be astonished, though we should find his brain, on some occasions, a little intoxicated."¹¹

Intoxicated or not, Pius continued to impress even skeptical observers. Goethe, seeing the pope say Mass in 1786, was disappointed in the ceremony but found the Holy Father "a beautiful and venerable figure of a man." Prince Heinrich of Reuss likewise affirmed, "I know of no sovereign with more noble a bearing than Pius VI. He has a commanding figure and in all his gestures there is something majestic and noble that harmonizes beautifully with his gentle character. His manners captivate everyone." Yet good manners could not hide the impetuosity and hot temper that kept Braschi's associates on guard. Some observers described him as "volcanic," delivering "explosions of rage against anyone seeking to conduct business." Others stressed his stubbornness and resistance to counsel, noting that during one protracted illness the pope refused to hear Mass or take Easter communion despite the normal threat of excommunication. As an older, wiser Bernis explained, "I keep an eye on him constantly as I would an excellent but temperamental baby, who might fall out the window if one isn't watching."¹²

Youthful as he seemed, Pius VI's first official gestures revealed his decidedly conservative streak. Within hours of his election on the morning of 15 February 1775, the new pontiff delivered an eloquent Latin speech with a characteristic blend of humility and pride. Although claiming to be unworthy of exaltation "from the lowest place to the highest," Braschi accepted his "dispensation from God" by invoking a constellation of heroic models ranging from Moses and David to Peter, St. Gregory, and St. Bernard. Although personally weak, he was strong as the heir of the Prince of the Apostles.¹³ His choice of official moniker is equally telling. Braschi broke the eighteenth-century pattern of repeating a recent precursor's name (Clement, Innocent, Benedict) by reaching back two centuries to honor the bellicose Counter-Reformation St. Pius V (Antonio Ghislieri, 1566–72). Except for Benedict XIII (1724–30), no pontiff since Marcello II (1555) had styled himself after so distant a predecessor. Several rationales seemed to be at play. As the last sainted pope, Ghislieri made a powerful protector, while his fierce reputation as the scourge of Protestants, founder of the Index, and victor over the Turks at Lepanto put current Church enemies on guard. At the same time, the name Pius (much like Julius) also enjoyed classical connotations by invoking one of Rome's greatest emperors (Antoninus Pius, 138–61). Indeed, piety – reverence and respect for the ways of one's ancestors – often seemed to be Braschi's highest ideal. In all these senses Pius VI's name itself heralded the historical nostalgia that would mark his entire pontificate.¹⁴

Braschi's new appellation was echoed by rapid revisions to his *stemma*, an equally important condensation of his character. As cardinal, his elaborate, quartered coat of arms included double-headed eagles, fleurs-de-lis, and stars, overlain with a central escutcheon showing Boreas the North Wind blowing on a lily (Fig. 3). Some gossips believed Braschi had simply made up these devices. Pasquino joked:

Redde aquilam imperio, Francorum lilia regi.
 Sydera redde polo; caetera, Brasche, tua.

[Return the eagle to the empire, the lilies to the king of the Franks;
 the stars to the sky; the rest, Braschi, is yours {i.e., the wind}.]

Whatever their origins, within months Pius took the statue's advice and jettisoned all but the escutcheon, which he used liberally to sign his important works. Both more legible and more expressive, it offered Boreas as a reminder of Braschi's Swedish origins and the waving lily as a sign that the pure Church bends without breaking. Pius's new *stemma* thus functioned much like a Renaissance *impresa*, visually encoding his firm but reforming influence on Roman affairs.¹⁵

Nowhere was Braschi's obsession with precedent clearer than in his first encyclical, issued on Christmas Day 1775, his fifty-eighth birthday. Like his

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3. Domenico Tiepolo, *The Arts Paying Homage to the Authority of Pius VI*, etching, 1775 (photo: ING)

acceptance speech, *Inscrutabile Divinae Sapientiae* refers constantly to reformers of the past, including Popes Gregory and Leo the Great and Sts. Peter Damian and Bernard. The encyclical form itself (an ancient custom revived by Benedict XIV, the only modern pope mentioned) recalls the “circular” letters that unified Christians during their early persecution. Pius clearly felt those days were returning and began with a word – “inscrutable” – that announces his scorn for the Age of Reason. “Who would not be shocked,” he asks,

when considering that we have undertaken the task of guarding the Church at a time when many plots are laid against orthodox religion, when the safe guidance of the sacred canons is rashly despised, and when confusion is spread wide by men maddened with a monstrous desire of innovation, who attack the very bases of rational nature and attempt to overthrow them?¹⁶

For Pius the danger was of biblical proportions. His bishops were “scouts in the house of Israel” and the *philosophes* reincarnations of the serpent that destroyed mankind: “deceitful sages” spreading false teachings, sowing unbelief, and encouraging rebellion against the Church. Desperate measures were needed. As Leo taught, bishops should cut out the infected for the sake of the flock. Poisonous books must be “forcefully and carefully” banished, while bishops must “gird on” swords to “expel this foul contagion.” Martyrdom was invoked, and the dangers of inaction painted as catastrophic.

Predictably, Pius drew his proposed remedies from Church tradition, advising his bishops to use the timeworn strategies of prayer, teaching, and good example. Just as the people of Judah were won back from wantonness by the reading of the law, so the divine word could provide “draughts of true philosophy” to counter false teachings. Learning must be matched with learning, because “God rejects as priests those who have rejected knowledge, and only the man who unites moral piety with the pursuit of knowledge can be a suitable worker in the Lord’s harvest.” Pius renewed Benedict XIV’s call for seminaries to instruct priests in “humane and sacred studies” so they could become “practiced in the interpretation of literature.” The Jesuits might be gone, but the *philosophes* must still be fought on their own ground. Finally, Pius vigorously promoted ecclesiastical patronage of the arts. “For the same reason” that priests must be properly educated, bishops “should undoubtedly always give special attention to the beauty of the house of God and the splendor and dignity of the objects dedicated to the divine service. Such beauty and splendor often greatly inspire the faithful, and draw them to the veneration of the sacred realities.” In emphasizing the salvific efficacy of splendor, Pius revived the Tridentine notion that material glory could win back hearts and minds seduced by Protestantism. Quoting Peter Damian, he condemned bishops who spend Church funds on personal comfort instead of