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The church's cardinals were scholars, pastors, saints, sinners

Thomas Reese | Jul. 13, 2011

THE CARDINALS: THIRTEEN CENTURIES OF THE MEN BEHIND THE PAPAL THRONE
By Michael Walsh
Published by Eerdmans, $23

The College of Cardinals is the oldest and most exclusive men?s club in the world, and Michael Walsh provides an interesting and entertaining account of some of its remarkable members. Walsh, a British historian, is author of *Opus Dei: An Investigation Into the Powerful, Secretive Society Within the Catholic Church* and books on popes and saints.

Many books have been written on the college, but Walsh focuses on the lives of cardinals who never became popes. This approach allows him to avoid expending precious pages on people whose lives have been extensively described in other books. Instead Walsh introduces us to men who played important but varied roles in the history of the church.

Rather than simply telling their stories in chronological order, Walsh organizes the cardinals by types -- a creative approach that allows him to emphasize themes rather than just recount events from ancient times to the present. But first, Walsh gives the reader a 20-page introduction to the history of the college -- its origins and development as a church institution. Although a treasure for Vatican connoisseurs and specialists, this scholarly chapter with 54 footnotes would have been better placed as an appendix at the back of the book where it would not have scared off average readers simply interested in some good stories.

The introduction gives a quick account of papal elections prior to the institution of the College of Cardinals and then details the development of the college?s role in the election of popes around the beginning of the second millennium. It is a useful and detailed history of the college for those unfamiliar with this development. Those wanting even more detail can peruse the collection of documents available at Salvador Miranda?s Web site at www2.fiu.edu/~mirandas/cardinals.htm.

But what most readers will enjoy in this book are the stories about cardinals that follow the introduction. Walsh groups his cardinals by categories that show how varied they are while still following certain patterns.

The cardinal categories used by Walsh are: ?The Precursors? (at the beginning of the second millennium), ?The

Nearly Men? (who almost became popes), ?The Dynasts,? ?The Scholar Cardinals,? ?The Saints? (very few), ?The Pastors,? ?Men of War,? ?The Politicos,? ?Secretaries of State,? ?The Exes? (those who resigned), and ?Family Men.?

In ?The Nearly Men,? we meet those cardinals who were almost popes, including some antipopes. Although talented and well-connected, these men were ultimately the losers in the ecclesiastical game of politics. Included here are Baldassare Cossa (the antipope John XXIII) and the English cardinal Reginald Pole, who failed to get the requisite two-thirds majority because of French opposition.

While Showtime may focus on the Borgia family, in ?The Dynasts? Walsh follows the ups and downs of the Colonna family, which had 18 cardinals between 1206 and 1766, although only one of them ever became pope. Their battles with the Orsinis are the stuff of papal history.

?The Scholars,? on the other hand, used their brains rather than family connections to advance in the church. Interestingly, most were not theologians but lawyers. As in civil society, legal training is a good entrée into politics. Nor are there many saints among the cardinals -- in fact the sinners make the more interesting reading. One of the most famous sinners would be Cesare Borgia, whom Walsh treats under ?Exes,? since he resigned the cardinalate to marry.

Although the organization of the book by types of cardinals is a help to the reader, Walsh would be the first to acknowledge that some cardinals do not fit easily into one box. Roberto Bellarmino could easily go under either the saints or the scholars. Pietro Gasparri, a secretary of state, was also an accomplished scholar of canon law.

Any book covering a millennium of history is bound to have a few errors that historians will pick at. I noticed, for example, that Walsh has Joseph Bernardin elected general secretary of the U.S. bishops? conference, when in fact he was appointed by Cardinal John Dearden. But for anyone wanting a sweeping overview of this most colorful and exclusive men?s club, Walsh?s book is the place to start.

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