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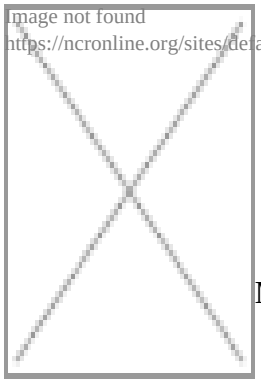
Entertaining history of 'female pope' has scholarly gaps

Peggy Weber Catholic News Service Catholic News Service | Sep. 24, 2008



MISTRESS OF THE VATICAN: THE TRUE STORY OF OLIMPIA MAIDALCHINI: THE SECRET FEMALE POPE, by Eleanor Herman. William Morrow (New York, 2008). 438 pp., $25.95.

Eleanor Herman is not afraid to take on seemingly controversial topics and unusual aspects of history. She has written *Sex With Kings* and *Sex With the Queen*. In her latest effort, *Mistress of the Vatican, she chronicles the story of Olimpia Maidalchini, whose brother-in-law was Pope Innocent X. Historians agree that Maidalchini had considerable influence with the pope and his papacy, which lasted 1644-1655.*

Herman has an engaging style and creates an interesting read about Maidalchini, Rome and the state of the church at that time.

However, there are many implications in the book that make a reader wonder.

For example, the introduction notes, "The church, too, looked on females as defective creatures. ... The church fathers, who in the second through fifth centuries grappled with Scripture to hammer out Catholic theology, were notorious misogynists."

Yet, she writes in Chapter 11 about the historical relationship of the Catholic church and women. She states that for three centuries "women played a major role -- teaching, disciplining and managing material resources. According to tombstones found in France, Turkey, Greece, Italy and Yugoslavia, some of these women were priests."

She also writes about the tradition of women priests through the fifth century.

Herman's book relies heavily on the writings of Gualdus Leti when it comes to facts about Maidalchini.

And church historians do not argue about the fact that she had considerable influence on the pope and his decision-making.

The Catholic Encyclopedia even notes that.

The book is vivid but often filled with "might haves," "could haves" and "imagines." One reads sentences that begin "we can imagine that one day Sforza (Olimpia's father) had a servant call her into his sitting room." Or the

sentence, "Perhaps Olimpia snuck out of the house and scurried across town to the bishop's palace, knocked loudly and handed her letter to his butler."

The book concludes with Maidalchini's death and notes "we can imagine her soul rising through the gold-embroidered velvet hangings of her four-poster bed."

Herman also refers to St. Thomas Aquinas as arguing his theology in the 12th century. He lived from 1225 to 1274, which of course makes him a 13th-century theologian. It is a small error but does make one wonder about other details.

The author also writes that the "Latin word for woman -- 'femina' -- was said to have come from 'fe' for faith and 'minus' for less since women were thought too weak to hold and preserve the faith." A quick check of Merriam Webster shows a different etymology.

She also writes about the decline of the town of Viterbo, north of Rome and site of the papal residence in the late 13th century, and notes "the papal court moved to the peace and quiet of Avignon, in southern France." The author probably does not want to delve into all the aspects of the Avignon papacy but it seems simplistic to describe it as a move to a quieter place.

Herman's book is revealing, entertaining and interesting. However, it is not a great scholarly work and it seems to have an agenda.

Herman concludes her book: "But Olimpia's story, completely true, has been completely forgotten. New church scandals fill the newspapers. New saints inspire the faithful. And in an age when other Christian churches have permitted female priests, the Catholic church adamantly refuses to consider doing so, citing tradition. The church does not concede that a woman has already run the Vatican itself, and her name was Olimpia Maidalchini."

(Weber is the author of Advent and Lenten reflection booklets for families, published by Twenty-Third Publications.)

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