



The Good Fryers

Heinrich Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 1487

*If then dead books may be committed
to the flames, how much more
live books — that is to say, men.*

Matthew Ory, Chief Inquisitor, 1544

† THE PRINTING PRESS HAD BEEN around less than a decade when Pius II was elected pope in 1458, but he was already a widely-read author, having penned a ribald bestseller—history's first 'bodice ripper.'

Pius's literary claim to fame, however, was to be his papal bull *Execrabilis*. To ensure that a gaggle of disgruntled cardinals could never again challenge the authority of the pope, *Execrabilis* affirmed the papacy as positively and forever superior to any council on earth. Still in effect today, Pius' bull is why popes unfortunately can no longer be impeached. (Regrettably, the Latin meaning of *execrabilis* is 'accursed'—not the arguably more appropriate 'crappy'.)

Pius was followed by Pope Paul II, a vain playboy famous for torturing the eminent historian Bartolomeo Platina on trumped-up conspiracy charges. Paul's scourging days ended when he dined on spoiled melons, and he was replaced by Sixtus IV, himself famous for commissioning the eponymous Sistine Chapel—although Michelangelo's famous frescoes would come later.

Less well known is the way in which Sixtus funded the chapel's construction: by licensing the prostitutes of Rome, taxing priests for their mistresses, and extending the sale of indulgences to the souls of the dead who lingered in Purgatory—an outlying province of the Church which, incidentally, had no basis whatsoever in scripture. (The latter innovation was extraordinarily profitable: A Christian had only one soul whose way he could purchase out of Purgatory, but he had many dead relatives.)

But Sixtus' most enduring masterpiece wasn't to be the Sistine Chapel, but rather the Spanish Inquisition. Established in alliance with King Ferdinand of Spain, the Inquisition would spread, literally, like wildfire, and keep inquisitors (and woodcutters) busy for the next 350 years.

In 1484, after receiving news that his allies had concluded a peace agreement without consulting him, Sixtus became so enraged that it induced a violent fit of gout, to which he succumbed after a few days bedridden. (Roman wags quipped that peace—rather than war—had killed the pope.)

After a conclave marked by rival factions rioting in the streets and the now mandatory all-night backroom bribery session, Sixtus was succeeded by Innocent VIII.

By this time, a significant number of books had been published, especially in the printing press's birthplace, Germany. Viewing literacy as a threat to the Church's authority, Innocent issued a bull requiring censorship of all books, but it was largely ignored.

Less easily ignored was Innocent's appointment of the first and most infamous of the Spanish Grand Inquisitors, the Dominican friar Tomas de Torquemada. Considering himself superior to all man-made laws, Torquemada had two thousand suspected heretics burnt at the stake during one year alone in Andalusia.

The end of the 15th century was marked by an unusual incidence of failed crops, sick animals and stillborn infants, now known to be a consequence of the 'Little Ice Age' that was gripping Europe at the time. Searching for a more opportune explanation, the pope blamed witchcraft, pointing the finger at women—in particular, elderly spinsters.

Innocent's 1484 bull *Summis desiderantes* attributed to witches working in league with the devil the power to slay infants still in the womb, destroy crops, and kill animals.

The bull was included in the preface to the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Witch's Hammer*), written by two other notorious Dominican friars, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Springer. A veritable handbook of torture, the book is very likely the most bloodthirsty tome ever written, and sat on the bench of every judge in Europe for the following three centuries.

Church doctrine, as set forth in time-honored documents like the *Nicene Creed*, made no mention of witchcraft, reserving supernatural powers to God alone. But Innocent's bull had the prerequisite scriptural endorsement, with Exodus 22:18 stating: 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.'

As an addendum of sorts to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, Innocent also authorized the itemized *Tariff of Torture*, which brought much needed standards to the costs a victim's family was required to pay for various interrogation procedures. A person could now be reasonably assured, for example, that it would cost five times as much to have their loved one's tongue ripped out and red hot lead poured in their mouth as to administer a simple flogging. At any rate—or rates—business was booming, and money rolled into the Church's coffers.

Innocent was reputed to have fathered the largest number of illegitimate children—as many as sixteen—of any pope in history. Stricken with fever in 1492, he was said to grow grotesquely obese, despite being confined to his bed and reportedly subsisting solely on milk from the breasts of accommodating female courtesans.

In an attempt to revive him as he lay on his deathbed, three young boys were duped into providing the pope with blood in an inept 'transfusion' (probably administered orally). All four died, of course, and—ever the wit—Innocent's parting pun was "I come to You, Lord, in my Innocence."