

# Pious and Political Impulses

## The Medici and The Church

Background notes

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St Lawrence depicted on the crozier of Pope Leo X probably designed by Michelangelo Brandini; Museo delle Cappelle Medicee, Florence.

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## Observants versus Conventuals

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*While what follows gives a broad outline of what happened with the Franciscans, all the Mendicant orders split into two factions (Observants and Conventuals).*

Friars were called to live according to the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in service to society, rather than through cloistered asceticism like monks. In the life of the friar, the exercise of public ministry was an essential feature, which entailed working among laypeople. They were supported, at least initially, by donations or other charitable gifts.

Even during the early days after the order came into being, a difference of opinion developed in the community concerning the interpretation of the rule regarding poverty. As the order grew, the literal and unconditional observance of poverty came to appear impracticable by a preponderance of the order, with its pursuit of learning and its accumulated property (churches and friaries) in the towns.

While some Franciscans favoured a relaxation in the rigour of the rule, especially as regards the observance of poverty, others preferred to keep to its literal strictness. A long dispute followed in which the “Friars of the Community”, who had adopted certain mitigations, gradually came to be called Conventuals, while those who were zealous for the strict observance of the rule were called *Zelanti*, and later called Observants.

The Order fragmented further between the “Conventuals”, who had been given permission to have their communities in the cities in order to preach the gospel and be of service to the poor, and the “Observants” who emphasized absolute poverty and the eremitical and ascetical dimensions of Franciscanism. Notwithstanding this division in the order, formally sanctioned in 1415 by the Council of Constance, both Observants and Conventuals continued to form one body under the same head until 1517.

In that year **Pope Leo X** aiming to settle long-standing disputes among Franciscan friars, issued a “bull of union” **Ite Vos** which was proclaimed in St. Peter’s Basilica on May 30, 1517 to the vast assembly of friars gathered for the “Most General (*generalissimum*) Chapter” of Pentecost. Its provisions effectively divided the Order into two independent congregations, the Friars Minor of the Regular Observance and the Friars Minor Conventual. They would soon be joined by a third, the Friars Minor Capuchin.



Cardinal St Carlo Borromeo, 1538 - 1584, , multiple artists

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## Church Renovation in a Counter-Reformation Context

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The Counter-Reformation was a gradual process beginning in the 1530s and gathering momentum as the century proceeded. 'Trent' rather than an initiator of reform should be seen as a codifier.

There are no specific directives to be found in the decrees of Trent regarding church renovation, but **Cardinal Carlo Borromeo** published a treatise in 1577, *Instructiones fabricae et suppellectilis ecclesiasticae*, which spelled out in very specific terms how a church should be designed. There can be no doubt that this treatise reflected Tridentine attitudes.

One reason for changes to be made in churches, was that at the moment when the Roman Catholic Church was responding to attacks by Luther, it was also calling for greater involvement of the layman in the celebration of Mass, yet many churches still retained their original rood-screens and choir enclosures ensuring the separation of clergy and laymen.

The accumulated chaos of 3 centuries of each private chapel being considered its patron's castle in which the decoration was not subject to overall planning meant that many churches were very cluttered. The irregularity of the interiors would have seemed hopelessly old-fashioned to the Renaissance viewer, for whom planned and ordered sequences such as those created by Brunelleschi at Santo Spirito, Florence were favourable. Consistency in side chapels was sought in terms of space and structure. These side altars were of course readily accessible to laymen, in keeping with the decrees of The Council asserting that sacred images had a didactic function.

The mood generated by Trent - that is the posture of confrontation between Roman Catholics and Protestants - was only reversed by Vatican II (1962/65) and the ecumenical spirit it generated.

## The Florentine Government (a short summary)

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The supreme executive office of the commune was the **Signoria**, which included eight priors and the standard-bearer (*gonfaloniere*) of justice.

The eight **Priori** of the Signoria were chosen from the ranks of the guilds of the city, six of them from the major guilds, and two from the minor guilds.

Names of Guild members (who had to be over 30 years old) were put into 8 leather bags (*borse*) and every 2 months they were drawn out at random. Only men who were not in debt, had not served a recent term and had no relation to the names of men already drawn, could be considered eligible for office. Immediately upon election, the 9 (including the standard-bearer) were expected to move into the Palazzo della Signora where they would remain for the two months of their office. As the chronicler Matteo Villani pointed out "Each Signoria had only 60 days in which to commit errors."

Two colleges, the **Dodici Buonomini** (12 members) and the **Sedici Gonfalonieri** (16 members) gave counsel and assistance to the Signoria on policy matters. The Signoria, Buonomini and Sedici Gonfalonieri were known as the **Tre Maggiori**. Other councils were elected as the need arose (The Ten of War, The Six of Commerce...) All served for between 2-4 months.

A novelty was adopted in 1387, referred to as the *borsellino* (little purse), which established a distinct privileged core group of priors (2 and then 3, from 1393, from the group of individuals eligible for the *Tre Maggiori*). This distinction was justified by the fact that such privileges were granted 'to the wisest of those who had been put in this little purse' and that 'wise men' had deemed them so. In other words, they had been judged by the scrutineers (*accoppiatori*) as very loyal to the state.



However the daily routine of government was in the hands of professional civil servants (mainly notaries). The activities of these men gave to the administration some degree of continuity and stability, which compensated in part for the weakness inherent in a system of amateur, part-time government.

The two legislative bodies of the commune were the **Council of the Popolo** and the **Council of the Commune**. The former comprised 300 members, including the Signoria and the colleges. The latter totalled 200 citizens of whom one-fifth were magnates. Both councils were elected by the Signoria and the colleges, for 6 month terms, reduced in 1366, to 4 months. The councils considered only those proposals which had previously been approved by the Signoria and the colleges. A majority of two-thirds was required in each council for passage of a provision.

The single branch of government that was not entrusted to the citizens themselves was the administration of justice. In this sphere, Florence followed the pattern of other Italian communes by calling on outsiders to fill the judicial posts of podestà, captain of the Popolo and executor of the Ordinances of Justice.

To prevent fraudulent manipulation of the electoral process, the Florentines transformed the system in which each stage was surrounded by elaborate safeguards. The key feature was the 'scrutiny' the selection of those citizens eligible for the Signoria.

## The Medici Bank

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Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici set up the bank in 1397. In the period, there were different categories of banks. The Medici were neither money-changers nor goldsmiths. Their bank was one of the '*banchi grossi*' or great banks, of which there were 33 in 1469 according to the chronicler Benedetto Dei. They were traders as well as bankers - merchant bankers.

The Medici Bank was a decentralized form of organisation. It was not one partnership like the Peruzzi or Bardi banks but a combination of partnerships, each of which had its own legal entity, capital and books. The branch managers could not be dismissed but they could be removed from office by prematurely terminating the partnership. The Medici had the final say in all matters of policy, the structure being like a holding company. The Medici controlled the subsidiary partnerships by owning at least 50 per cent of the capital. They also owned the trade mark (after the dissolution of a partnership).

Power had to be delegated, given the distance and the slowness of communications, with the result that branch managers abroad had quite a free hand.

The surviving business records convey the impression that the head of the Medici firm confined himself to making important decisions and to laying down the rules. Cosimo knew how to pick able managers and he insisted his directions be obeyed to the letter. His prestige was such had no one dared to disregard his orders.

Cosimo, as long as he lived, took an active part in the management, but Lorenzo, his grandson, leaned heavily on Francesco Sassetti, the general manager, because he Lorenzo was more interested in politics, diplomacy, art and literature. Sassetti ceased to receive any guidance



from his master, who was far too busy running Florence. Perhaps too as he grew older, Sassetti became the victim of his own self-confidence. As a result, the mismanagement by Lionetto de' Rossi, the governor of the Lyons branch, was not discovered until it was too late to apply effective remedies. With regard to the Bruges branch, Sassetti was probably responsible for the recall of Angelo Tani and the appointment in his stead of Tommaso Portinari, which led to disastrous results.

In his History of Florence, Machiavelli blames the downfall of the Medici banking house on Lorenzo's lack of business ability and on the extravagant conduct of the branch managers. But there were business conditions which also proved to be unfavourable after 1465. There was a change in the market ratio between gold and silver. Since most deposits were repayable in gold, the Medici were crushed between the steady fall of gold prices and the mounting burden of their commitments to depositors. The Medici lost in more than one way, because gold prices of commodities fell steadily and because much business was done in France, England and Flanders, whose silver currency was depreciating in terms of gold. While assets tended to shrink in value, liabilities remained the same. As the purchasing power of gold increased, interest charges payable in gold became more and more burdensome. As the assets declined in value, they reduced the owner's equity, until there was nothing left. By 1494, the bank collapsed.

See R de Roover, *The Medici Bank, Its Organization, Management, Operations and Decline*, 1948, New York University Press.

## Popes of the Early 16th Century



**Julius II (1503-13)**



**Leo X (1513-21) - MEDICI**



**Adrian VI (1522-23)**



**Clement VII (1523-34) - MEDICI**