

Absolute Power: How the Pope Became the Most Influential Man in the World

Paul Collins

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The sensational story of the last two centuries of the papacy, its most influential pontiffs, troubling doctrines, and rise in global authority

In 1799, the papacy was at rock bottom: The Papal States had been swept away and Rome seized by the revolutionary French armies. With cardinals scattered across Europe and the next papal election uncertain, even if Catholicism survived, it seemed the papacy was finished.

In this gripping narrative of religious and political history, Paul Collins tells the improbable success story of the last 220 years of the papacy, from the unexalted death of Pope Pius VI in 1799 to the celebrity of Pope Francis today. In a strange contradiction, as the papacy has lost its physical power--its armies and states--and remained stubbornly opposed to the currents of social and scientific consensus, it has only increased its influence and political authority in the world.

Absolute Power: How the Pope Became the Most Influential Man in the World Details

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From Reader Review Absolute Power: How the Pope Became the Most Influential Man in the World for online ebook

Steve says

Paul Collins does an excellent job of tracing the papacy from its low point in 1799 when Pius VI died as an effective prisoner of Napoleon to the modern papacy where Francis is viewed as a strong voice of moral leadership. Collins acknowledges his biases and is open about his feelings about several of the modern pontiffs. He really likes John XXIII, but was a bit unhappy with the canonization of Pius X.

Andrew says

An interesting idea that starts by exploring the development of papal power but turns into a potted history (and somewhat political evaluation) of recent popes. The thread of the main idea just about survives to the end but frays as Collins calls for an unsurprising laundry list of reforms to the Church and papacy.

Worth the read for some behind-the-scenes of the maneuvering at Vatican II and papal diplomacy.

Kevin McCormack says

good history
interesting presentation

Peter Fazackerley says

interesting

Caidyn (SEMI-HIATUS; BW Reviews; he/him/his) says

DNF at 36%

I couldn't find it in me to continue. I think it spent too much time on popes and could have been whittled down with more commentary on other areas. Definitely more for a papal historian, not for someone who has a passing interest in the papacy and only when connected to worshippers.

Sally says

I became a little fixated after Easter on understanding Catholic structures and history a little better. This book focuses on popes over the last several centuries, mixing in quite a bit of other church politics and theory about centralized authority versus the "body" of the church. I struggled a bit with the details of how the papal infrastructure had been organized and evolved over time, as well as with keeping track of the various papal lieutenants and opponents, but I learned a lot. Collins has a point of view, too, and that's helpful in hearing how his arguments come together. Not a light read, but I started to look forward to accomplishing a few pages each night.

Kyle says

I received an ARC of this book via NetGalley in exchange for my honest review.

Incredible research into a subject many outside of the Catholic church may not be all that familiar with prior to reading this book. I know that I was not that well versed in the power struggle of the papacy. This book was masterfully researched and thorough in the exploration of the subject. This is a must read for anyone with an affinity for European/world history or Catholicism.

Thomas Stama says

Excellent history and analysis of role of the pope from 1799-present day.

What I found fascinating was how much the role of pope changed. I thought Mr. Collins' observation about popes during my lifetime are surprising deep. His insights into Pope Saint John Paul II and Pope Paul the VI explained a lot for me. Enjoyed his observations about Pope Saint John the 23rd who still is my favorite pope in my lifetime so far.

Janet says

I received a DIGITAL Advance Reader Copy of this book from #NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. From the publisher -

This fascinating and sensational story of the last two centuries of the papacy is a vital call for the reevaluation and reimagination of papal power by one of today's preeminent theologians

In 1799, the papacy was at rock bottom: The Papal States had been swept away and Rome seized by the revolutionary French armies. The cardinals were scattered across Europe, and Catholics feared they would be unable to elect the next pope. Even if Catholicism survived, it seemed the papacy was finished. And yet, just over two hundred years later, the pope still stands "at the very center of the central conversations of our time" (Time). His influence reaches across the world--from Cuban politics to gender equality to the refugee crisis--and the strength of his "soft power" is incomparable.

In this gripping narrative of religious and political history, Paul Collins tells the improbable success story of the last 220 years of the papacy, from the unexalted death of Pope Pius VI in 1799 to the celebrity of Pope Francis today. As a historian, journalist, and theologian, Collins also poses pressing, critical questions to the Catholic Church: Does today's church governance stray from the teachings of the gospel? Is the papacy's internal power so great that it might be considered heretical? If so, what can be done to ensure a credible--and Christ-like--path forward?

Absolute Power is required reading for anyone interested in the history of today's complex power structures- as well as anyone invested in religious, political, and social progress in the West.

I am going to admit I am not Catholic and my judgment is quite clouded towards the religion due to pedophile sex scandals, watching "The Borgias" on tv (he was a pope!?!?!?) and having read the novels of Dan Brown who definitely does NOT like Catholicism. (I would, as a librarian, kill to see their archives though!) . When you consider that Henry VIII had England leave the Catholic church so he could divorce his wife (thus founding the Anglican/Church of England faith) and that 500 years later the UK is now considered a Catholic country by having more Catholics than any other Christian faith (and closely followed by Muslims) you realize that the Pope has major power in countries we would never think of as "Catholic"! This book is excellently written and was impeccably researched which make me a big fan of this book - the fact that there are more Muslims in the world is interesting as they do not have a "leader of the faith" like the 1.2 billion Catholics do. This is a very interesting read for any history or religion fan who will enjoy the excellent facts and figures and insight into this issue presented in this book. Five stars.

Jim Gallen says

“Absolute Power” is author Paul Collins’ interpretation of Papal History from 1799 to the present in which he critiques the concentration of power in the Popes’ hands.

The tale commences with the death of Pope Pius VI, a prisoner of Napoleon by whom the Papal States had been occupied. Although many were thinking that the long Petrine line was finally extinguished, after a six-month interregnum a conclave in Vienna elected Pius VII who re-established Church authority in the wake of the French Revolution and began the rise of the Papacy to unprecedented prestige and influence. An extensive discussion of the personalities and issues of that era shed light on political as well as ecclesiastical history. Developments and Papacies during the rest of the 19th century move fairly quickly although considerable ink is devoted to Pope Pius IX, the longest reigning Pope of all.

From Pius IX through Francis, Collins examines the personalities and issues of each Pope and the events of his tenure. A final assessment of each concludes the narrative of his reign. Recent Popes are evaluated in light of how they, in the author’s opinion, influenced Vatican II and carried out, or undermined, its teachings. Several times while reading I was reminded of things my friend and history professor, Rev. William B. Faherty, S.J., told me, particularly about the investigations of St. Pius X and the claim that Pope John Paul II and his Curia reversed much of Vatican II.

This book is decent history but clearly advances the author’s point of view. From this work I glean that Collins is in favor a restoration of power to bishops and national conferences of bishops and is critical of Popes who accumulated power in Rome and in their own persona. At times he presents his own views on issues such as human sexuality as “right” versus Papal error and delves into what I consider to be personal preferences such as the translation of the Bible used in English masses. I think he overplays positions as clearly right (his) and wrong (Popes’) that were explored and decided by the hierarchy. It cannot be overlooked that the author left the priestly ministry to carry on the struggle for change in the Church through critical literature that he could not effect through his priesthood. I think that “Absolute Power” is a worthwhile historical read but its subjective evaluations should be viewed as conversation starters rather than final words.

Patricia says

This is a history of the papacy from the death of Pope Pius VI in 1799 to the unfinished papacy of Pope Francis. So the papacy in the nineteenth century, the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty first century.

Pope Pius VI died as a prisoner of Napoleon and was buried in unconsecrated ground as a citizen of the French secular state. The papacy was almost extinguished but the nineteenth century popes gradually clawed back power and set the office up as an authoritarian presence. Paul Collins places them clearly in the history of their period, mainly European history. There were setbacks. The Risorgimento and the loss of the Papal States, the Concordat with Mussolini and two European Wars eroded papal temporal power but authoritarian popes cemented papal power over Catholics.

Twentieth Century popes have had to adjust to mass media, radio then TV then mass international travel and now instant communications through the internet.

I was interested in finding out about the 19thC popes who were unknown to me and the early 20thC popes. But I was impatient with the finicky theology and preoccupations. I was surprised at my interest when we moved into the papacy of John XXIII and those who followed. There is a little bit of behind the scenes stories and it is fascinating. Pope John Paul II doesn't stand up well to scrutiny. My feelings entirely. Although his immense importance is acknowledged. And there is an interesting analysis of the problems and possible ways forward for Pope Francis.

Altogether an interesting book covering one aspect of the history of the last 220 years.
