

CHURCH REFORM IN 18TH CENTURY ITALY

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CHARLES A. BOLTON

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(THE SYNOD OF PISTOIA, 1786)

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INTRODUCTION

The complete history of Jansenism will probably never be written because to write it would involve the study of a movement that grew and changed constantly for more than two hundred years and found a different expression in many countries, especially France, Holland, and Italy. Of course the ordinary Frenchman of any education would think that he knew something about Jansenism. For him, and for many Englishmen of some French culture, Jansenism is a heresy about grace and predestination that found expression in the *Augustinus* of Cornelius Janssens or Jansenius, Bishop of Ypres and at one time professor in the university of Louvain.¹ The theological position of Jansenius was adopted by his friend, Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, commonly known as the Abbé de S. Cyran, a director of the monastery of Port Royal des Champs. Through its relations with S. Cyran and with Antoine Arnauld, brother of Angélique Arnauld, Abbess of Port Royal, the monastery entered into the theological controversies of the time, especially after Arnauld's severe moral work – *De la Fréquentante Communion*.²

But to the ordinary Frenchman, Port Royal, besides its quarrels about predestination, is chiefly memorable for its great literary names, Pascal, Racine, Boileau, and to some extent La Fontaine and Mme de Sévigné. What Jansenism really stood for and what became of its ideal after the brutal demolition of Port Royal in 1709 by Louis XIV is but little known. Port Royal's most famous historian, Sainte-Beuve, finished his story with the destruction of the abbey. No writer of his literary power has attempted to continue the history, or to follow it into the foreign lands where Port Royal had found fresh disciples. The greatest modern disciple of Port Royal, the late Augustin Gazier, has

¹ *Cornelii Jansenii Ypresensis Augustinus*, published after his death at Louvain in 1639.

² Paris, 1643. Cf. Gazier, *Histoire générale du mouvement janséniste*, Paris, 1922, 2 vols.

only given a sketch of the Jansenist history in France; while the most thorough critical study of recent times, that of E. Préclin,³ is chiefly valuable for Jansenism in France at the end of the eighteenth century.

It is significant that Préclin chooses as his sub-title: *L'Histoire du Richérisme dans le bas clergé*,⁴ thereby showing that the Jansenist label covers other ideas than those of Jansenius. Any observant reader of Sainte-Beuve might have gathered that the fight to the death at Port Royal was not entirely about the *Augustinus*. Indeed, Gazier says: "I should be inclined to think that Jansenius was not in the library of the gentlemen of Port Royal and that St. Augustine was not their bedside book."⁵ Port Royal was fighting to preserve a reform that was based on what was conceived to be the tradition of the early Fathers, and to vindicate the rights of the individual conscience against the tyranny of Louis XIV and his advisers, who appeared to be merely the principalities of this world. Port Royal stood for freedom of conscience and for what might be called a certain "non-conformity" in the face of what seemed to be a worldly, ignorant, and intolerant State orthodoxy. Louis XIV was probably right when he felt that Port Royal preserved something of the spirit of the Fronde revolution.

How easy is it, then, to understand Préclin's conclusion on eighteenth century Jansenism: "The success of the Revolution, far from being the result of providential circumstance, is beyond all doubt the result of these doctrines."⁶ The truth is that Port Royal in its fight for freedom gradually grouped under its banner – and never more than after it had been razed to the ground – all those who stood for the same principle, even if animated by different motives. Thus it rallied the impoverished parish clergy and many laymen, who felt that the ruling powers, both spiritual and temporal, were tyrannical and unprincipled. Through this development the name Jansenist came to include much of Gallicanism, Parochialism (what its enemies would call Presbyterianism), Laicism (what its enemies would call Congregationalism), and every variety of reform, including the Liturgy in the vernacular, the Bible for all, the suppression of new devotions and of superstitious practices, and the reform of Indulgences.⁷

³ E. Préclin, *Les Jansénistes du XVIII^e Siècle*, Paris, 1929. For Sainte-Beuve see the modern critical edition by R. Doyon and C. Marchesne, Paris, 1926–32, 10 vols.

⁴ "History of Richerism among the lower clergy." Richer's ideas are explained later.

⁵ *op. cit.*, I, p. 75.

⁶ *op. cit.* p. 538.

⁷ Cf. Arnauld's *Nouveau Testament* and the *Année Chrétienne* of N. Le Tourneux, 6 vols, 1682–85.

Because Jansenism is no one thing it is not always called by the same name. Persecuted and humiliated in France, it was encouraged in the Austrian Empire of Joseph II and becomes Febronianism and Josephism. In Italy, however, the movement clings very much to its origins and glories in its attachment to the *Augustinus* and to the martyrs of Port Royal. It is perhaps here more than elsewhere that the movement achieves full consciousness of its aims and ideals; for the Italians of the latter half of the eighteenth century inherit the achievement of a hundred years of struggle in France; they are moreover in close touch with both the French and the German Jansenists; with the French chiefly through the Jansenist refugees at Utrecht, and with the Germans through the Austrian political ascendancy in North Italy. It is a long cry from Bishop Janssens of Ypres to Bishop Ricci of Pistoia both in space and time, and though there is a spiritual unity between the two, the *Augustinus* throws but little light on the Synod of Pistoia.

The subject of this present work is not just a part of a forgotten religious controversy. It is of interest to the secular historian in several ways: it throws light on the rule of one of the lesser known "benevolent despots" of the 18th century – Peter Leopold of Tuscany, brother of the famous Joseph of Austria; it traces some of the sources of the French Revolution. This study should interest the philosopher, because it shows how a certain number of ideas can endure and have influence in spite of the bans of Church and State. It is of especial interest to the student of Church history in modern times. In this present century a number of Italian scholars have been attracted to the subject because they feel that the Italian democratic tradition derives much from what Professor Rota used to call with some exaggeration *Il cattolicesimo rosso* (Red Catholicism), but what the Germans more correctly label *Reformkatholizismus*. A good deal of this "Reform Catholicism" has been accepted in the work of Vatican Council II – what John XXIII liked to call the *aggiornamento*.

ABBREVIATIONS

N.E. – *Les Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques* (quoted by the year and the page).

G.I & II – vols I & II of A. Gelli, editor of *Memorie* of Ricci.

Rod. – N. Rodolico: *Gli Amici e i tempi di S. de' Ricci*.

Jem. – A. C. Jemolo: *Il Giansenismo in Italia*.

P.I, II, & III – vols I–III of De Potter: *Vie et Mémoires de S. de Ricci*.

A.D. – *Atti e Decreti del Concilio Diocesano di Pistoia*.

A.D. App. – The appendices to the above volume.

A.F. – The Bull *Auctorem Fidei* against Pistoia.

For all the above see the bibliography.