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The Physician Who Became Pope of Rome

Hardy A. Kemp, M. D.

On the twentieth of September, 1276, the Cardinal Bishop of Tusculum, Petrus Hispanus, was elected Pope of Rome.

For this office he chose the name by which he is known today, John XXI. In his own time he was better known as *Petrus Hispanus, Physicus*, a Portuguese physician, one indeed of high ecclesiastical preferment, and the only one of the medical profession to occupy the Chair of Saint Peter.

The immediate origins of his priesthood are somewhat obscure. There is, however, a clear record of his first appointment to a Church Office: that of Canon of Leon. It was there, it appears, that he attracted the favorable attention of a strongly influential

churchman, Cardinal Ottoboni Fieschi, who was later to become Pope Adrian V.

Church history shows that Canon Petrus served the Cardinal as personal physician on his journeys as Papal Delegate, thus no great imagination is necessary to surmise that through these services the physician-priest became *archiater* (chief-physician) to Pope Gregory X.

Shortly thereafter, Petrus Hispanus, *Physicus*, became Archbishop of Braga (1273), and in the same year Cardinal Bishop of Tusculum.

These were momentous times in a momentous century, one indeed which some regard as one of the most important in the Christian Era. It was a time when immensely powerful forces of the Church and the State were beginning to exert pressures that would shape the centuries to come. It was a time of great auguries and portents, and one in which some prescience must have guided the

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Conclave of Cardinals in their choice of a successor to Innocent V.

By all precedent, the election of 1276 should have gone to the able and distinguished Cardinal Deacon John Gajetanus Orsini. It is said, however, that the Conclave feared to offend the sinister Charles of Anjou by electing an Italian. Worse still, they were loath to strengthen Charles' grasp on the Papacy by the election of another cardinal of his choice, for certainly the decedent Innocent V. (Born Peter of Tarantaise) had been a willing tool of King Charles and thus a detriment to the Holy See and a threat to the freedom of Italy. Should they have dared the ill favor of Charles by electing Orsini just at that time, the good Cardinal Deacon would undoubtedly have suffered the deadly cruelties that brought the reign of Ottoboni Fieschi (Adrian V) to an unhappy and untimely close. The choice called for a quality of statesmanship worthy of the moment, and thus the Conclave chose a man from neutral Portugal, Cardinal Bishop Petrus Hispanus, Physician; albeit, both haste and pressure affected their deliberations.

The Physician-Pope was the son of a physician, one Julianus, who sent him to study with the famous Faculty of Montpellier at the University of Paris where in due time Petrus was made *Magister* of Medicine. Earlier he had been a fellow-pupil of Roger Bacon, and together they must have sat at the feet of William Shyreswood, the great English logician, whom Bacon ranked above Albertus Magnus, the dominant scholastic of the time.

As for this plan of studies, it will be recalled that the university programs of the Middle Ages were catholic in

nature, and that Medicine was not then sharply separated from the other branches of higher learning. Consequently, it was not a great step in either direction to pass from one discipline into another. Such indeed is the story of the Physician-Pope.

The record of his medical career begins with a professorship of *Physick* at the budding University of Salamanca. As a teacher, and incidentally as a commentary on our modern physician-teachers, he must also have had practice privileges since there is a record of a stipend for his medical services to the community. Incidentally, also, it was at the request of a surgeon colleague there that *Petrus Physicus* wrote his first medical book, "A Dietetic Treatment of Surgical Patients." Later on his writing came to include annotations on the works of Avicenna, Isaac Judaeus, Galen, Hippocrates, and other medical references of the time.

The most important of the written contributions to medicine by this physician-pope are, "A Pharmacopoea for the Poor" (*Thesaurus Pauperum*) and "A Book of Eye Diseases" (*Liber de Oculi*).

The *Thesarus*, which is dedicated to Pope Gregory X, is a collection of prescriptions for every disease then known. Written before the invention of printing, it was copied innumerable times to satisfy its popular demand. Those who have reviewed the earlier copies have remarked that the many copyists who passed it along must have added their own favorite recipes since in its later forms it is a bewildering conglomeration of all of the medical notions of the Middle Ages. (It was first printed in 1476 and 1486 at Antwerp and again in 1497.)

Yet in its time the *Liber* was an important guide. Guy de Chauliac referred to it in his *Chirurgics*, Arnold of Villanova included some of its remedies in the *Brevarium*, and interestingly enough there are records in the Vatican Library to show that Michelangelo copied its prescriptions for his own use.

Various commentators believe that the *Thesarus* and the *Liber* were the work of persons other than *Petrus Hispanus*. Some have suggested that his father, for one, was the author. The majority of opinion is to the contrary. Indeed, Baptista Platina in his "*Lives of the Popes*" (London, 1685) has this to say specifically of Pope John XXI., "He wrote many tracts in his life, especially certain rules of Physick; for he was counted a good Physician." The Catholic Encyclopedia and Monsignor Mann's "*Lives of the Popes*" are similarly unequivocal.

Petrus Hispanus Physicus deserves particular credit for having been years ahead of his time in the rejection of demons and evil spirits as the cause of disease. He did believe, however, that the body is under the influence of the planets and that this influence could be interpreted through astrological data.

Pope John XXI, like all strong men, had his enemies and their expressions of hatred were false and malicious in the extreme. It will be readily understood, then, that his death on May 14, 1277, which was caused by an unexplained cave-in of a private study where he was working at the time, was seized upon as clear proof of his "folly," his hatred of monks, his allegiance with the "powers of darkness", and a fitting end for a desecrator of the Papal Chair.

Nonetheless, he died in *munitus sacramentis ecclesiasticis*, and he is the only one of the popes to be pointed out to Dante in Paradise. "*E Pietro Ispano*," says Bonaventura, "*Lo qual giu luce in dodici libelli.*"

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