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William M. Crawford

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# The Physician Who Became Pope



WILLIAM M. CRAWFORD, M.D.

Fort Worth, Texas

BY MODERN standards, the transformation of a successful practicing physician into a pope is almost unthinkable. Yet this is precisely what happened in the thirteenth century when the renowned Petrus Hispanus exchanged his scalpel for the papal ring and keys to become Pope John XXI.

It must be remembered that the thirteenth century was a period of intellectual awakening that marked the beginnings of the Renaissance. One of the characteristics of the period was its union of medicine and theology, due chiefly to the fact that virtually all learning for centuries had been in the hands of the clergy.

Petrus was born in Lisbon between 1210 and 1220. Little is known of his early life. He was the son of a Lisbon physician, Julianus. He first appeared as a student at the University of Paris. There, as a fellow student of Roger Bacon, he came under the influence of the great logician, William Shyreswood.

As medicine was not then sharply separated from the other

branches of philosophical learning, it was not abnormal for Petrus to pass from the logic of Aristotle and the Arabian philosophers to medicine.

During the middle of the thirteenth century Petrus was a teacher of medicine at Siena when the ambitious town was about to establish its own university. It was here that he wrote his first medical work, "A Dietetic Treatment of Surgical Patients," at the request of his colleague, a surgeon, John Mordentis of Faenza.

Before his election to the papacy, Petrus had become not only a high church dignitary but a popular and famous practicing physician. His name was a medical household word in the middle ages.

An Italian, Ottoboni Fleschi, Pope Adrian V, was the preceding pope. Adrian had suffered so much during his election at the conclave supervised by Charles of Anjou that he lived only 38 days as pope and died at Viterbo, August 18, 1276.

A new conclave was assembled at once. Because of the hot weath-

er and assaults from the excitable Viterbians, a compromise candidate was hastily elected by the cardinals. On September 20, 1276, the Cardinal Bishop of Tusculum, Petrus Hispanus, was elected Pope John XXI.

The choice logically should have gone to the great Cardinal Deacon John Cajetanus Orsini, but the conclave did not wish to offend Charles of Anjou by electing an Italian, so they picked a man from the neutral country of Portugal. However, John Cajetanus Orsini had not long to wait. He soon succeeded the man whose election he himself had brought about. As Nicholas III he followed Pope John a year later in 1277.

Pope John's reign, though popular, was shortened by a strange accident. He was engaged in the study of the problem of the papacy when on May 14, 1277, the ceiling of his workroom crashed down upon him. He died six days later. Pope John was buried at Viterbo in the Church of San Lorenzo. His grave was forgotten until 1886, when at the expense of the Portuguese ambassador and Pope Leo XIII a monument was erected to his memory.

The greatest work of Petrus Hispanus was the popular "Thesaurus Pauperum" (Treasury of Medicine for the Poor Man). This famous treatise was printed for the first time at Antwerp in 1476. The book probably was written at the court of Gregory X, to whom it was dedicated.

The "Thesaurus" is a collection of recipes for every disease then

known. Beginning at the top of the head with a "cure for the fallynge heare" and ending with "a drinke agaynst the fistule," this book had an enormous vogue in the middle ages. By being copied and recopied, before the discovery of printing in 1450, every copyist added his own favorite prescription until the work finally became a mixture of medical treatment and magical formulas of the most grotesque sort. For example, "Agaynst dronkennes — Give unto that man that is given to dronkennes, the Leghtes of a shepe, and he shall feele no dronkennes. Give unto a drunken man the ashes of burnt swallowes and he shall not be dronke whyle he lyvet." "For bledynge at the nose — The joyce of hogges dounge case into the nostrilles doth restraine the blood." "To provoke the bowles — A supposytory or pessaire of cotton dypt in Tirbyntyne doth cleanse the matrice."

The chapter "of the Colyke and the Payne called iliaca passion" undoubtedly refers to appendicitis.

The above, though very crude, represents treatment before anatomy was given to us by Vesalius and the circulation of the blood by Harvey.

At the present time, Pope John XXI has his name linked with an international prize for medical ethics. The "John XXI International Prize for Medical Ethics" was instituted at Paris in 1951 by the Association of Portuguese Catholic Doctors. The competition theme is "Responsibility of the

Doctor Before the Actual World." The prize consists of 5,000 Belgian francs.

At St. Paul's Basilica in Rome, a frieze with medallion portraits of the popes contains a likeness of

John XXI, the only physician who ever sat in the chair of St. Peter in Rome.

#### REFERENCE:

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