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The Physician Who Became Pope of Rome

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5:32 A. M. - Hospital Time

The silent flashes of rigid white, stilted starched, stubborn aprons
And nylon symphonies in scurries of soft speeded-breath nurses;
Exhausted, sweat-marked, haggard internes desperately draped in smocks;
Once hardened to white marble stiffness,
Wrinkled, blood sprinkled, and crushed by the night’s harsh hours of wear;
The crumpled, fluid stained, light blue slacks of Obstetrics’ delivery room;
And the scalpel creased, prim green trousers of the Operating room.
Protrude as pilings supporting tornado tossed, cyclone cursed beacons
In the inscrutable ocean of life.

These apostles of modern medicine possess the hand won knowledge of centuries,
But are slaves of the mechanism,
Hanging and humming on the wall above the desk in the Emergency Ward,
That projects its movements into each treatment room.
Their eyes plead with the hands of the clock to give them minutes,
Precious minutes, valuable minutes to work — to sweat — to pant —
To fight and fight and fight and work.
But defiant Death collects its toll from man for having lived.

The somber garb of sacerdotal black absorbs the whispered words
Of consolation, that bounce around and in and out the ears
Of shocked, staring, stunned, death-robbed parents;
And the clock spits seconds into eternity.

Against the rhythmic hum of the huge red hand, that chops its way
Around the face of the twenty-four hour clock,
Cradled in the alcove of the Labor Room,
—
The mother’s cry in pains of birth announces the entrance
Of a helpless, strengthless, seven pound, six ounce mass
Of sprinkled-pink, slippery, striated, soul-stained, innocent flesh
Into this weary, fighting, pushing, striving, wrangling, feuding, wrangling world.

5:32 A. M. in the hospital corridors with pox-lighted windows.
Death walks its patrol, a snatching, silent, sneaking, thieving sentry,
And tosses a mocking, sneering, scornful, sarcastic laugh to Life.

5:32 A. M. Hospital Time — a night’s rest is gone.
The day begins anew for a weary brain in a tired body to visit the sick,
Comfort the sorrowing, to prepare the dying, to give them Christ,
The Saviour of their souls.
The chosen one of God’s Anointed continues the endless guest
For that lonely, saddened, wandering soul,
To sneak through Heaven’s unlocked back door,
Forever opened by dropping blood in the blackest hours
On Calvary’s slope.

Death can claim the body,
But his consolation is to know that Hell is cheated of a soul.

Father John M. Shelley
Pottsville, Penna.

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 preference, 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 freedom of Italy. Should they have dared the ill favor of good OttoBon Fieschi (Adrian VI.), 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.

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 interesting enough there are records in the Vatican Library to show that Michelangelo copied its prescriptions for his own use.

Various commentators believe that the Thesaurus 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, 1865) 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.

REFERENCES

Catholic Encyclopedia

