Jnl of Ecclesiastical History, Vol. 66, No. 3, July 2015. © Cambridge University Press 2015 562
doi:10.1017/S002204691400061X

The Prodigal Son: Pope Gregory XVI and a Wayward Priest

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This article deals with the evolving attitude of Mauro Cappellari (later Pope Gregory XVI) towards the extraordinary case of a capricious priest, Calogerá Biondi, caught up in an illicit marital affair in Constantinople. Given the fragile state of the Armenian Catholic Church in the Ottoman Empire in the 1820s, and the potential firestorm that could be set off if the couple's story came to light, Cappellari lobbied the Curia to release Biondi from his spiritual obligations and countenance the marriage. Once elected pope in 1831, he would overrule his predecessor's decision that denied them this union. Cappellari's pragmatic approach to this case stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming perception of him within the historiography as sternly doctrinaire.

In 1810, at the age of thirty-one, Calogerá Biondi abandoned his position as priest in the diocese of Girgenti, Sicily, in search of new adventures. He spent the next few years travelling extensively before finally settling in Constantinople, where he began work with a merchant of the city. Before long a local lady had attracted his attention. The relationship that ensued destroyed any residual loyalty to his vows; it resulted in conversion to Islam, marriage and at least four offspring.

Eleven years into his second life, Biondi was suddenly overwhelmed with deep regret. In a letter dated 10 October 1828 he addressed Pope

ACDF, DV = Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, Dispensationes Variae, 1828–30; ASV, SS, EM, Est. = Archivio Segreto Vatican, Secretario di Stato, Epoca Moderna, Esterni; AVPRI = Archiv Vnešnej Politiki Rossijskoj Imperii; BNR = Biblioteca nazionale, Rome

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Leo XII directly, asking for forgiveness and desiring to return to the fold.[1] He wrote of the guilt that weighed heavily on his conscience ('massima inquietudine') and the great remorse ('rimorsi di coscienza') that he had felt during most of these wayward years. He was determined to leave Constantinople and return home, and begin anew his former life. But he first needed forgiveness, in the form of a papal absolution. In words reminiscent of Augustine of Hippo, he declared his intention to leave his wife and children and live out his remaining days in a (Capuchin) monastery, 'weeping for his sins', so that the final resting place of his soul would be secure. He would entrust the care of these five souls to 'the hands of the Holy Pontiff'. Leo forwarded the matter to one of his most trusted aides, Cardinal Mauro Cappellari, a Camaldolese monk and the future Gregory XVI (1831–46): 'The Holiness of our Lord commands me to send without delay to the hand of Your Eminence the attached letter which arrived today in the mail from Constantinople. The Holy Father wishes your most Reverend Excellency to examine the contents in order to have your opinion.'[2]

Known for his theological sure-footedness and methodological approach to delicate matters, Cappellari proceeded with due diligence, investigating the veracity of Biondi's story. He wrote to the bishop of Girgenti, where Biondi had previously served, requesting information on him. However, given the sensitivity of the matter, Cappellari did not reveal the real reason for the inquiry: 'I wrote, therefore, to the bishop of Girgenti asking him in general terms to provide me with as much information as he had or could get hold of [about Biondi], but without indicating the motive for my inquiry.'[3] The bishop independently verified the facts in the case through Biondi's nephew, with whom the former priest was still in contact. The only fact that Biondi had not disclosed to his relative was his conversion to Islam.

Cappellari was touched by what he considered to be Biondi's sincere, heartfelt confession to the pontiff, and likened him to the prodigal son, who, after a period, had come to understand his errant ways, 'groaning under the weight of the diabolical chains' which had ensnared his soul.

[1] '[C]onfinato a dover piangere li suoi peccati in ristretto Convento de' Cappuccini, e che la donna e li figli li consegnerà nelle mani della Santità Vra [Vostra]': Calogerá Biondi to Pope Leo XII, 10 Oct. 1828, ACDF, DV, n. 120ff.

[2] 'La Santità di Nostro Signore mi comanda di far pervenire senza ritardo in mano di Vostra Eminenza Reverendissima la quì acclusa Lettera venutagli cola posta di oggi da Costantinopoli. Il S. [Santo] Padre desidera che Vostra Em'za R'ma [Eminenza Reverendissima] n'esamini il contenuto per quindi tenerne seco Lui proposito': Leo XII to Cardinal Mauro Cappellarii, 10 Nov. 1828, ibid.

[3] 'Scrissi pertanto a Mgr [Monsignore] Vescovo di Girgenti pregandolo genericamente di somministrarmi tutte quelle notizie che egli avesse e potesse avere intorno a un tale soggetto, senza però punto indicargli il motivo di tali ricerche': Cappellari opinion and letter to Leo XII, Jan. 1829, ibid.

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The Church, Cappellari believed, should open its arms to him and facilitate his return to Rome. Thus he affirmed the validity of Biondi's vows to the Church, judging his marriage illegitimate.[4]

Why then did Cappellari depart from this principled position eighteen months later and push for a matrimonial dispensation after he had initially considered the marriage illicit? He would stand alone in adopting this most pragmatic position among the five cardinal members of the *ad hoc* committee assembled by Pope Leo to adjudicate on the matter. And herein lies the rub. To the extent that Pope Gregory XVI is known at all now, it is as an arch-conservative, doctrinally-rigid pope.[5] It was he who penned *Il trionfo della Santa Sede* (*The triumph of the Holy See*) (1799), championing the divinely-inspired, immutable nature of papal government. Thirty years later he held firm to the notion that clerics were destined by their creator to run all major aspects of papal government. In the face of European demands for rational moderate reform, he remained unmoved. Austria even dispatched a special envoy to try to ease the process of change.[6] In the end only the most sterile 'reforms' were permitted. This attitude has, for many, defined Gregory's whole pontificate. Often cited is the Lamennais affair in which he decried basic freedoms of speech and the press (*Mirari Vos,* 1832), in an attempt to staunch the flow of liberal ideas seeping in from northern Europe.

The story that follows therefore questions an overly simple interpretation of Gregory, and forces us to adopt a more nuanced assessment of his person and his policy. The stern judgements that are so prevalent in the historiography should not be discounted, but rather interpreted in a slightly different way. Papers on the Biondi affair discovered in the archives of the Holy Office – and hitherto untold – complicate the picture of Gregory and reveal him not as the unbending doctrinaire figure of *Il trionfo*, but as one who calculated the political fall-out in determining his curial opinion. In this instance political considerations concerning the Ottoman Empire trumped the integrity of a clerical vow to the Church.

After it had been determined that the family should leave Constantinople, the greatest immediate concern for Cappellari and the other cardinals was how the couple and their children would make their way to Rome. Should Biondi travel together with his 'false wife' and children, the couple hence being exposed to sexual temptation, or should

[4] Ibid.

[5] For example, Owen Chadwick wrote that 'Gregory XVI, because his doctrine of the papacy was so high, had not the reputation of a realist': *A history of the popes, 1830–1914*, Oxford 2002, 48. One recent exception, in the Belgian context, is Vincent Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See from Gregory XVI to Pius IX (1831–1859): Catholic revival, society, and politics in 19th century Europe*, Leuven 2001.

[6] On the Sebregondi mission see Alan Reinerman, *Austria and the papacy in the age of Metternich*, ii, Washington, DC 1989, 136–45.

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they travel separately and risk personal harm or possible exposure?[7] After all, a Muslim woman was forbidden to travel without the company of a close male relative, to say nothing of travelling alone, especially over such a long distance. Her very life was in danger. And should she be apprehended, what would happen to the children? Therefore, Cappellari initially advised Biondi to use his own judgement as to how they were to travel: if the risks of travelling separately were too great, then they were to travel together, but as 'brother and sister', exercising all necessary caution to adhere to this arrangement.

In the end, a chaperone for the woman and children was arranged by the Sardinian foreign minister, the marquis di Gropallo, who was on assignment in the Ottoman capital. He acted as papal advisor in this matter, and organised the financial aspects of the trip.[8] The family would receive further assistance once they arrived in Livorno. Repayments would then be made to the Sardinian representative to the Holy See, the marquis di Crosa. Gropallo had evidently met the woman, and hinted at trouble ahead when he suggested treating her with 'all possible sweetness in order to reassure her of your good intentions . . . This will merit you many advantages.'[9]

Why was this seemingly isolated affair so important to the Curia? It was because of the precarious position in which the Catholic Church found itself in the late 1820s within the Ottoman Empire. The onset of the Greek Revolution in 1821 meant that Armenian Catholics loyal to Rome were in danger, as they were thought to be collaborating with the Greeks in some sort of pan-Christian alliance. Following the battle of Navarino in October 1827, in which ships of the alliance of Russia, France and England obliterated the combined Ottoman-Egyptian fleet, all Roman Catholics were deemed enemies of the Ottoman state and attempts were made to rid the country of them. Clerics, particularly in Constantinople and Ankara, were exiled; Armenian Catholics were pressed to convert to the Gregorian Church ('Catholicos'), and some church properties were either confiscated and converted during the war, or plundered.[10]

Cappellari, in his position as prefect of Propaganda, was spearheading efforts to bring aid to the Church. He organised the safe transport of the

[7] '[L]a pretesa moglie . . . come fratello e sorella': Cappellari opinion and letter to Leo XII, Nov./Dec. 1828, ACDF, DV, n. 120.

[8] 'Ho ricevuto la lettera che L'Eminenza Vostra mi ha fatto': marquis di Gropallo to Cappellari, 26 Apr. 1830, ibid.

[9] 'A questa proposito prendo la libertà di suggerire all'Em'a V'ra [Eminenza Vostra] di dare le disposizione onde si agisca massimamente colla Donna di tutta la possibile dolcezza per essere Essa senza colpa, e per darle sempre maggiori prove che ha scelto mettendosi in viaggio il buon partito, credo che verranno da ciò molti vantaggi': ibid.

[10] Alan Palmer, *The decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire*, New York 1992, 86.

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exiled clerics to Italy, made the necessary financial arrangements[11] and appealed to dioceses and European representatives in Rome for assistance of all types, especially financial.[12] He was kept abreast of problems in the area by reports coming out of the Ottoman Empire *via* diplomats and missionary clerics, such as the Lazarites in Constantinople.[13] He also received reports from the nuncios in Paris and Vienna directly and indirectly via the secretary of state's office.[14] Given Cappellari's knowledge of the situation, both Leo XII and Pius VIII (and their secretaries of state) sought his advice on how to aid the Armenians.[15]

Cappellari's concerns were three-fold: first, the well-being of Catholics living under the sultan's rule, including enabling clerics to return home; the reacquisition of Church property; and the appointment of a spiritual leader in order to bring stability to a weakened and declining Church debilitated by the effects of revolution and the subsequent reprisals. Later he would urge a fourth objective, the establishment of official (and thus protected) status within the empire in the form of a millet. With such delicate proceedings underway, Cappellari feared that, should the Biondi affair come to light, the results could be disastrous for his mission and would scupper all his efforts up to that point. Such was the gravity of the affair that Cappellari believed it prudent to expunge Pope Leo's name from all correspondence on the Biondi matter; thus not only would the pontiff be shielded from undesirable criticism, but the Church itself would be protected should the proceedings become public. Instead, Cappellari suggested using his own name, which, while known to a certain extent, would not be as damaging to the Church in the region.

What is more, Cappellari felt duty-bound to assist the beleaguered Armenian Church beyond the obligations of his curial office. He had personal and spiritual connections with them which strengthened his resolve to help. Armenians traditionally had strong ties to Venice, Cappellari's spiritual home, where he had received his seminary education. The Mechitarists, an Armenian religious order, and the Camaldolese,

[11] Cappellari to Tomasso Bernetti, 21 June 1828, ASV, SS, EM, Est., vol. 404, folder 4. The government of Turin also provided 2000 *scudi*.

[12] Cappellari circular letter, 13 Sept. 1828, Autographs of Popes, BL, MS 21517, fo. 54, and Cappellari to Francesco Tiberi, 7 Feb. 1829, ASV, Archivio della Nunziatura di Madrid, folder 282. The Church in Naples too provided assistance.

[13] The French ambassador, Louis de Saint-Aulaire, to Cappellari, 18 Apr. 1830, ASV, SS, EM, Est., vol. 404, folder 4. See also Cappellari to Giulio Maria Della Somaglia, 7 June 1828 (Russia), vol. 597, folder 12.

[14] The papal nuncio to Vienna, Ugo Pietro Spinola, to Cappellari, 17 Sept. 1828, and Paris nuncio (Luigi Lambruschini) to Cappellari, 9 Apr. 1830, ASV, SS, EM, Est., vol. 404, folder 4.

[15] Guiseppe Albani to Cappellari, 16 Mar., 8 May 1830, ibid. See also Cappellari to Albani, 24 Feb. 1830, vol. 532 (1830).

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Cappellari's own order, were both part of the Benedictine family, and thus shared the same spiritual heritage. In the fifteenth century an Armenian community had begun meeting in Venice in the church of Santa Croce degli Armeni.[16] In 1715, following a period of persecution in the Ottoman Empire, some Armenian Catholics, including Mechitar, were exiled to Venice. An eponymous movement sprang from this charismatic leader. Such was the activity among the order that a distinctive Armenian element could be identified in mainstream Venetian culture, in monastic, economic and literary terms.[17] What is more, the Mechitarists settled on the island of San Lazzaro, just four kilometres or so by boat from Murano, where Cappellari had initially studied and taught at San Michele (1786–95).

Cappellari's lifelong fascination with exotic languages naturally attracted him to this group from the East, who made their name with the publication of early Armenian texts. By 1789 they had already published 250 works in Armenian.[18] Later he would take a keen interest 'in the progress of Armenian literature'.[19] In fact both he and Leo XII were seen as champions of such literary scholarship. It seems that the favoured status of the Armenians began even earlier, under Pius VII; the Irishman Richard Hayes remarked rather critically of the 'entrenched' position of these Armenian 'schismatics' within the Curia.[20] Cappellari kept close company with those who wrote on Armenian topics. He was 'an intimate friend' of Father John Aucher while in Venice.[21] In 1827 Aucher translated from Armenian the works of Severian of Gabala and dedicated his project to Cardinal Cappellari.[22] Cappellari was also on first-name terms with Aristakes Azarian, the prior-general of the Mechitarists in Vienna, who 'esteemed' the future pope.[23] While in Rome, many of his Armenian contacts were made at the Urban College run by Propaganda Fide. Cappellari was associated with the congregation from 1820 as consultant and from 1826 as its prefect. He knew personally many of those appointed to leadership positions in the Levant in the 1830s, including Patriarch Anthony Nourijan, as they had been pupils at the college.

[16] Bruno Bertoli, 'Clero e popolo tra santità e peccato', in B. Bertoli and William L. Barcham (eds), *La Chiesa di Venezia nel Settecento*, Venice 1993, 39–87 at p. 43.

[17] Boghos L. Zekiyan, 'Il monachesimo mechitarista a San Lazzaro e la rinascita armena del Settecento', ibid. 221–48 passim.

[18] Ibid. 228–9.

[19] *Dublin Review* vii (Aug., Nov. 1839), 336.

[20] Cathaldus Giblin, 'Papers of Richard Joachim Hayes', *Collectanea Hibernica* xxx (1988), 55–119 at p. 86.

[21] Minas Nurikhan, *Il servo di dio Abate Mechitar: fondatore dei PP. Mechitaristi (Padre Armeni Benedittini) di Venezia, di Vienna; sua vita e suoi tempi*, Venice 1914, 20–1: http://archive.org/details/ilservodidioabatoonuri, accessed 21 Sept. 2012.

[22] *Dublin Review* vii (Aug., Nov. 1839), 336.

[23] Friedrich von Hurter, *Aus dem Leben des Hochwürdigsten Herrn Aristaces Azaria, Doktors der Theologie, Generalabtes der Mechitharisten-Congregation*, Vienna 1855, 106–10.

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Nor was this the first time that Cappellari had taken up an Armenian cause in the Curia. A letter of 1815 from a member of Cappellari's order, discussing an unspecified matter, revealed his deep interest in Armenian affairs: 'Concerning the affair of the Armenians of St Lazzaro, we have humbly taken it to Father Abbot Capellari [*sic*] with maximum urgency, who took up the matter with Cardinal [Lorenzo] Litta.'[24] Goodwill, it would seem, went both ways. The author of that letter mentioned a request for the Armenian monk travelling to Venice to stop off in Belluno, Cappellari's home town, in order to deliver a package of relics.[25] With so many overlapping ties to the Armenian community, it was understandable that its welfare was of the utmost importance to Cappellari.

Once Biondi and his putative wife arrived in Rome, the matter was taken up by the Congregation of the Holy Office in summer 1830. The affair was shrouded in secrecy and Cappellari desired that it remain that way: 'The case is still a secret here in relation to the condition and personal circumstances of the state of both; and it would be desirable that one not publicise it; it is ... very delicate ... and most urgent.'[26] On 12 August cardinal members of the Holy Office met to discuss how to proceed. Three different solutions were suggested. A trio of cardinals adopted a more principled line, adhering strictly to canon law. They believed that Biondi should be separated from the rest of the family, acknowledging his earlier vows to the Church. A middle position, and surely the most impractical, was adopted by consultants at the Holy Office and supported by its Cardinal Prefect Pierfrancesco Galeffi. Here too the intention was to follow canon law but in a most unnatural manner: the couple could live together but as brother and sister.[27] Cappellari alone diverged from canonical precepts, advocating a third and most politically expedient solution.[28] He suggested that a papal pardon sanctioning the marriage might be warranted in this 'touching and extraordinary case' and that, under a new identity, Biondi and his family could establish themselves somewhere outside the Papal States where they were not known and begin a new life. This, he felt, was

[24] 'Circa l'affare degli Armeni di S. Lazaro abbiamo preso l'affare ... col Pad. Ab. [Padre Abate] Capellari col massimo impegno, io parlai a lungo col Card. Litta, che mi senti volentieri, gli citai il P. Ab. Capellari, come informato a pieno di tali materie': G. Zambis to P. Zurla, 11 Feb. 1825, St Gregory papers, BNR, folder 91, letter 281.

[25] Ibid. Cappellari had a special spiritual attraction to relics, often attempting to acquire them earlier in his career: Anselmo Giabbani, 'L'ambiente monastico di don Mauro Cappellari', in *Miscellanea historiae pontificiae*, Rome 1948, xiii. 185–200 at pp. 190, 199.

[26] 'Il caso è qui ancora secreto per rapporto alla condizione, e alle personali circostanze dello stato di entrambi, e sarebbe a desiderarsi che non si pubblicasse; ed esso è singolarissimo, e direi prodigioso, e assai delicato, interessantissimo ed urgentissimo': Cappellari to Pius VIII, July 1830, ACDF, DV, n. 120.

[27] Minutes of a meeting of five members of the Holy Office, 12 Aug. 1830, ibid.

[28] Ibid. and 'Nell'anno 1830 L'Emo Cardinale Prefetto' at fo. 3.

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the best way to proceed for the good of these six souls as well as for religion.[29] In any event, the cardinals were in agreement that 'all support and assistance and help both spiritually and temporally' would be given to them, as an act of kindness and mercy. They were receiving 'not a small sum' of forty-two lire from Propaganda every twenty-four days for rent and living expenses.[30] With this financial aid came the expectation that the whole family would convert to Christianity.[31]

The committee also agreed that, whichever the solution, the family should not live in Rome; rather somewhere where they were not known. Cappellari suggested that they move to Marseille. The premise for this location is unknown, other than that it was sufficiently far from Rome. In the end northern Italy was the choice. Biondi was also to be furnished with a new identity; instead of Calogerá Biondi, he was now Antonio Blondini, a merchant from Turin.[32]

Cappellari's greatest fear was the danger to the Armenian Church, should the woman (whose name is never revealed) return home discontented and Ottoman officials somehow catch wind of the story. Unfortunately for Cappellari, the current pope (by this time Pius VIII) had a different agenda. He was more concerned about the precedent that this case would set for clerics within the Church than with any repercussions from the Ottoman authorities. To that extent, he seemed willing to accommodate the woman should she desire to leave and take up her Islamic faith again. For Cappellari, this represented a potentially huge danger for the Armenian Church:

> I believe that she may want to remain Muslim. If the children are taken away from her, as the Pontiff has suggested, in this desperate scenario ... if she wanted to return ... to Constantinople who could stop her? If she returned then either with or without children, using her Muslim faith as justification for her departure, the disgrace and damage to the (Christian) faith is scarcely to be imagined: the betrayal of her supposed husband, the vexations, the assistance of the Holy See in order to induce her to embrace Christianity, and her triumphant perseverance in remaining faithful to Islam. And I do not omit to expose my fears to your Holiness that such calumnies ... could cloud [*intorbidare*] the affairs of the Armenian Catholics in the Ottoman Empire.[33]

[29] Minutes of a meeting of five members of the Holy Office,12 Aug. 1830, ACDF, DV, n. 120.

[30] Castruccio Castracane to Cappellari, 22 Dec. 1830, ibid. n. 120ff.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Minutes of a meeting of five members of the Holy Office, 12 Aug. 1830, ibid.

[33] '[M]i sono permesso di supporre il caso che voglia essa rimanere nel Maomettismo. Se le si togliessero i Figli, come offerti dal Padre, in quali forse disperati scenari la medesima non darebbe? Se volesse tornarsene Turca qual venne in Costantinopoli, chi potrebbe impedirglielo? Tornandovi poi, o coi figli, o senza figli, per giustificare la sua partenza, e farsene presso i suoi Maomettani un merito per il

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He continued to push for a dispensation, worried about the impracticality of the two other solutions, that of living separately or as siblings, and the possibility of rash behaviour on the part of the couple:

> In support of the view for a dispensation, I have put forward the more moving aspect for the Holy Father's consideration: the possibility that the woman, if unable to unite in legitimate matrimony with this Biondi, might repudiate her Christianity and either try to cut short her life in order to find a solution to this supposed slander on her honour or return to Constantinople with her children. And I would like to reiterate to Your Holiness that, whatever might be said … about the woman being currently well-disposed to baptism, she is still Turkish. Therefore, one should fear that the insuperable opposition of [Catholic] ecclesiastical laws in granting the couple legitimate marriage might create a very violent shock of such an order as to result in the most fatal and violent consequences.[34]

Cappellari's fears were reinforced in a letter of December 1830. Biondi's 'wife' was threatening to end her life or to flee to Constantinople should she be denied the right to live with her husband.[35] The dishonour and stigma of being labelled 'a prostitute' and being an outcast from Islamic society for the rest of her life compelled her to consider such extreme actions. Apostates from Islam after all lived under the lingering fear of possible execution should they be discovered.

Cappellari urged Pius VIII to permit the marriage after the woman's baptism, to ensure that the children remained Catholic and to avoid harm to the Armenian community: 'Inspired by compassion over the loss of six souls, especially the innocent children, and considering that the return to

seguito ritorno, quali calunnie non sarebbe capace inventare a danno della Religione, cioè di tradimento per parte del supposto marito, di vessazioni e sevizie per parte della Santa Sede onde indurnela al Cristianesimo, e di vittoriosa costanza per parte sua in rimaner fedele al Maomettismo. E qui non omisi di esporre a Sua Santità i miei timori, che tali calunnie possano trovar credito preso il Gran Turco, e possano perciò intorbidar l'affare degli Armeni Cattolici dell'Impero Ottomano': Cappellari to Pius VIII, 16 Aug. 1830, ibid.

[34] 'In appoggio del parere per la dispensa, ho proposito nell'aspetto il più commovente ai riflessi del Santo Padre il caso possibile, che la Donna, vedendo di non potersi unire in legittimo matrimonio con esso Biondi, ricusi di farsi Cristiana, e, o mandi ad effetto la minaccia di trovar modo di abbreviarsi la vita, per non sopra solvere alla da essa imaginata diffamazione di disonoratezza, e preveda di ritornarsene in Costantinopoli co' suoi figli. Non ho mancato quindi di ripetere a Sua Beatitudine ciò, che dissi agli Em'i [Eminenti] della Suprema, cioè, che la Donna, quantunque presentemente benissimo disposta al Battesimo, è però ancora Turca, e che perciò sarebbe a temersi, che l'insuperabile opposizione della legge Ecclesiastica alla Effettuazione del divisato matrimonio, non facesse in lei un urto troppo violento, da cui lasciasse trasportarsi a parimente violente funestissime risoluzioni': ibid.

[35] Castracane to Cappellari, ibid.

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their country ... might excite a new fury against Catholicism by the always brutal government.'[36] He admitted his unease: 'I find myself in extreme embarrassment ... in this affair.'[37]

Despite his fears about what would happen if the woman were allowed to go home, Cappellari affirmed his complete submission to the pope and full adherence to any final decision.[38] And indeed he would be called to submit to a decision that he opposed. Pius concluded that the greatest concern for the Church was not possible repercussions for the Armenian Church, but the example that this case would set for celibate priests: 'the most severe problems [*guai*] especially in these times, if one agrees to such an arrangement, in Italy, would arise from a priest taking a wife; it would be a most fatal example of which the enemies of clerical celibacy would take advantage'.[39] Pius had good reason for concern. This issue of clerical marriage had resurfaced in Germany in the late 1820s, and the practice had spread quickly. Clerics in Baden and Freiburg initiated movements promoting clerical marriage, decrying the Church's insistence on celibacy. Known collectively as Febronianists, these (mainly) young clerics sought support from political authorities in order to enact change independently of Rome.[40] Drawing on the ideas of the movement's late eighteenth-century founder, they claimed that celibacy was merely a discipline of the Church and not an immutable doctrine and therefore should not be enforced on all clerics. In practice, such relaxed conditions were already becoming commonplace in the eighteenth century in certain German lands.[41] More than 80 per cent of seminarians in Baden had partners.[42] What is more, the movement in Baden had radicalised other areas of central and lower Germany, and Prussia too pushed for reform.[43] Pressure

[36] '[S]timolata dalla compassione per la perdita di sei anime, specialmente degl'innocenti fanciulli, e considerando che il ritorno di costei in patria, come ad alte grida domandava, avrebbe potuto eccitare un nuovo irritamento contro il cattolicismo presso quel governo sempre barbaro': ibid.

[37] 'Io mi trovo nel massimo imbarazzo, si per la qualità dell'affare': Cappellari to Pius VIII, 28 July 1830, ibid.

[38] Cappellari to Pius VIII, 16 Aug. 1830, ibid.

[39] '[D]icendo, che guai se, massime in questi tempi, si accorda, ed in Italia, che un Prete prenda Moglie; si sarebbe un esempio fatalissimo di cui ne abuserebbero gli inimici del celibato ecclesiastico': ibid.

[40] Dagmar Herzog, *Intimacy and exclusion: religious politics in pre-revolutionary Baden*, Princeton 2009, 24–39.

[41] See also Owen Chadwick, *Popes and European revolution*, Oxford 1981, 109–11.

[42] Herzog, *Intimacy and exclusion*, 29. Earlier in the century, during the Napoleonic era, 2,000 of more than 3,000 priests opted to remain in their relationships after their petitions to remain married were denied in light of the new French concordat (1801), which granted the Church control over such internal practices: Ronald N. Eberley, *The unnatural law of celibacy: one married man's struggle to become a Roman Catholic priest*, New York 2002, 50–1.

[43] This also included Hesse, Württemburg, Bavaria and Silesia: Herzog, *Intimacy and exclusion*, 29.

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continued unabated in the 1830s. The level of concern was high enough to compel Pope Gregory himself to address the issue in the eleventh paragraph of *Mirari Vos* (1832):

> Now, however, we want you to rally to combat the abominable conspiracy against clerical celibacy. This conspiracy spreads daily and is promoted by profligate philosophers, some even from the clerical order … We ask that you strive with all your might to justify and to defend the law of clerical celibacy as prescribed by the sacred canons, against which the arrows of the lascivious are directed from every side.

Despite having strong reasons for his decision, Pius offered a contorted solution to the Blondini case, which aimed to appease all sides but in the end satisfied virtually no one: Blondini and the woman were allowed to live together 'as brother and sister'.[44]

From the Curia's perspective, the affair was concluded. The family at the centre of it all, however, was of a different mind. Biondi arrived to Rome with his wife and children in tow in early summer 1830.[45] They were provided with free transport and lodging while they adjusted to their new life and went through the catechism.[46] Early on in their stay, however, the behaviour of the newly-named Blondini and his family was described as 'irregular'.[47] As Cardinal De Gregorio was negotiating a time and place for their baptism that autumn, the whole family suddenly left Rome for Naples. Blondini's request for a holiday in Naples, ostensibly to escape the heat, was interpreted in Rome as another lapse in faith; that in fact the real reason for the family's departure was to live a secular life.

Castruccio Castracane, secretary of Propaganda of the Faith, who was monitoring the situation, offered more detail:

> less than fifteen days have passed since Sr Blondini presented himself to me asking for financial assistance, which I readily provided. When I expressed surprise at his trip to Naples, he told me that the woman was affected by the excessive heat, making her ill; thus he was obliged to go there, but the expenses [of this trip] were actually for the purposes of pleasure. If this is the true reason, it seems that it should not be difficult to explain to their spiritual superiors. But I fear that the real interpretation of their unplanned departure … might actually be that they plan to establish themselves in Naples or from there to depart [to a different location].[48]

[44] Castracane to Cappellari, 22 Dec. 1830, ACDF, DV, n. 120.

[45] There is a discrepancy between earlier missives telling of four children and this one reporting five. Perhaps the wife had been pregnant.

[46] Minutes from a meeting of five members of the Holy Office, 12 Aug. 1830, ACDF, DV, n. 120.

[47] Castracane to Cappellari, 22 Dec. 1830, ibid.

[48] 'Non varcarono però quindici giorni che il S.r [Signor] Blondini mi si presentò per chiedermi soccorso di denaro, cui senza difficoltà somministrai, ed avendogli esternato la mia sorpresa per il suo viaggio a Napoli, Egli mi rispose che la Donna abbattuta di troppo dall'eccessivo caldo a suo sollievo lo avea obligato ad andarvi, e per

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Their stay in Naples, however, was cut short when they were found to have inadequate documents;[49] they were forced to return to Rome.

The monsignor assigned to give religious instruction to the family told Castracane that he believed that the woman wanted to return to Constantinople with her children and that Blondini would accompany her part of the way before separating.[50] This is just the scenario that Cappellari had feared. She had recently made two requests for 'largesse', which was in each case delivered 'promptly'.

Moreover, upon their return to Rome, Blondini was even more uncooperative, according to reports.[51] He treated Roman officials with 'disgust' and his wife's coldness towards Christianity revealed to church officials their true intent. They wished to escape Rome and remove themselves from the conditions imposed upon them. Blondini had abjured Islam back in the middle of August 1830, with Cappellari as witness, but he had since shown only slight interest in the Christian faith.[52] Since their return from Naples his wife had not received any religious instruction.[53] Castracane could not understand why, if their intentions were sincere, Blondini had not apprised Monsignor Tomaggiani of his return to Rome in order to resume their '[Christian] education': 'I warned Sr Blondini . . . of the enormity of his failings, and not only did he receive my warnings with indignation, but what is more he complained that there had not been enough regard for the work that he had done in leading the woman and the children to the faith.'[54] Castracane concluded very gloomily that he feared that Propaganda was financing 'a concubine' for Blondini.

The case took yet another unexpected turn when Cappellari was elected pope, as Gregory XVI, following eight weeks of deliberation, on 2 February 1831. He moved forthwith to reverse Pius VIII's decision and granted absolution, allowing the couple to live as husband and wife.[55] Gregory had good reasons for moving as quickly as he did. First, with so much progress made on behalf of Armenian Catholics, he wanted to leave nothing to chance. In 1830 a Latin patriarch, Anthony Nourijan, had been named to

le spese si era espropriata di una gioia. Se questa fosse stata la vera causa sembra che non dovesse esservi difficoltà a renderne intesi i superiori con cui trattavano per avvicinarsi alla Chiesa. Ma io temo che la interpretazione data alla loro improvvisa sortita, avesse tutto il fondamento che avessero cioè idea di stabilirsi in Napoli, ovvero da colà imbarcarsi': ibid.

[49] Ibid. [50] Ibid. [51] Ibid. [52] Maurizio Benedetto Olivieri to Cappellari, 19 Aug. 1830, ibid.

[53] Castracane to Cappellari, 22 Dec. 1830, ibid. It seems that neither the woman nor the children had been baptised by this time.

[54] 'Il S.r Blondini avvertito da me a portarsi da Persona penetrata nell'enormità de' suoi falli, e non solo ha ricevuto con sdegno i miei avvertimenti, ma di più si è querelato che non si abbia abbastanza di riguardo all'opera da Lui fatta di condurre alla Fede la Donna ed i figli': ibid. Castracane writes '5 children'.

[55] Gregory XVI letter, ibid.

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Constantinople, providing more structure and legitimacy to the Armenian Catholic community.[56] Pius VIII had called on Cappellari to assist the secretary of state with Nourijan's transition, since as prefect of Propaganda Cappellari possessed the necessary political and ecclesiastical expertise to deal with the particularities of this job, including Nourijan's Austrian citizenship (Cappellari, who came from Belluno, also held Austrian citizenship). Cappellari approved the negotiation and later drafted the letter sent to the Armenians telling of the news.[57] Cardinal Placido Zurla, Cappellari's closest friend and fellow Camaldolese monk, presided over the installation ceremony.[58] And at the beginning of 1831 the sultan finally granted a millet to the Catholic Armenians, providing them with long-desired political legitimacy.

Secondly, securing an immediate end to this lengthy issue was prudent, given the impending crisis in the Papal States on the heels of Gregory's election; significant unrest was being reported in areas to the north of Rome, precipitated by the rumoured plans throughout the lengthy conclave for revolt within the capital city itself.[59] Louis Napoleon (nephew of Napoleon I) and scores of Italians were implicated and forced to leave Rome, only then to regroup around the revolutionary Ciro Menotti in Modena.[60] Such was the crisis that Pope Gregory was forced to name an interim secretary of state earlier than planned in order to deal with the sheer volume of issues that required attention. The Russian envoy Prince Grigory Gagarin noted that 'Since his election, Gregory XVI has not wanted to hurry to name a definite minister preferring … first to orient himself [with the important political matters], but the rapid pace of events has obliged him to decide to name the pro-Secretary of State, Tomasso Bernetti.'[61]

[56] Cappellari to Albani, 11 June 1830, ASV, SS, EM, Est., vol. 404, folder 4. This letter also discusses more problems surrounding the appointment, including Cappellari's opposition to Nourijan. See also Cappellari to Albani, 30 Mar. 1830, and Cappellari to Pius VIII, 23 May 1830, on the report of the Propaganda.

[57] Cappellari to Albani, 16 June 1830 and 5 Aug. 1830, ibid.

[58] M. le Chevalier Artaud de Montor, *Histoire du Pape Pie VIII*, Paris 1844, 221.

[59] Giorgio Maggioni, *Il conclave di Gregorio XVI nel diario di Gaetano Moroni*, Belluno 1995, passim.

[60] Blanchard Jerrold, *The life of Napoleon III*, London 1874, 160–2; F. A. Gualterio, *Gli ultimi rivolgimenti Italiani: memorie storiche*, Florence 1852, 334. Two other dated but standard works are G. Vicini, *La rivoluzione dell'anno 1831 nello Stato romano*, Imola 1889, and R. del Piano, *Roma e la rivoluzione del 1831*, Imola 1931.

[61] 'Il se proposait selon l'expression dont il s'est servie vers moi, s'orienter préalablement et connaître par lui-même, mais la marche rapide des évènements l'a obligé à se décider à nommer le Card. [Cardinale] Bernetti pro-S. S': Prince Grigory Gagarin to Count Karl Nesselrode 1/13 Feb. 1831, AVPRI, 190/525/366, report 12. Gagarin is rumoured to have influenced Gregory's choice. Such a scenario is not out of the question given the close relationship that the two men enjoyed: Emilia Morelli, *La politica estera di Tommaso Bernetti: Segretario di Stato di Gregorio XVI*, Rome 1953, 70.

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Revolts were reported in four of the five regions of the Papal States and local government was being toppled, causing the papal government 'consternation'.[62] To compound his worries, Gregory also had to address external problems. Revolution in the Kingdom of Poland induced Gagarin to request early action from Gregory in the form of an official rebuke to those Polish clergy who had taken part.[63]

There is much to be gleaned from the Biondi case in understanding both the policies and person of Gregory XVI. His initial principled stance in the affair was replaced by a more practical solution as the circumstances, including the unpredictability of Biondi's wife, threatened to complicate matters for the Armenian Catholic Church. Once Cappellari became pope he overturned his predecessor's decision and permitted the couple to live in a lawful marriage. Church unity was paramount for Cappellari, and this meant, above all, preserving the Armenian Catholics from destruction. Keeping the Biondi family together greatly reduced the risk for his Church in the Levant at a most precarious moment. He also desired to retain the family of new converts within the Catholic fold, especially the children.

The affair also reveals Cappellari as a moderate within the Roman Curia, at least by the standards of the time. This was understood by his contemporaries within the diplomatic corps in Rome. The secretary of the Austrian embassy in Rome, Baron Gennotte, drew up a list of potential *papabile* candidates for the conclave of 1829 and placed Cappellari as a *moderato*, the most liberal-leaning of the three categories on his chart.[64] Diplomats from Prussia, Austria, England and France also saw him as both politically realistic and astute, based on his approach to decisions within the Curia while cardinal (1826–31).[65]

[62] Gagarin to Nesselrode, 29 Jan./10 Feb. 1831, AVPRI, 190/525/366, report 9.

[63] Gagarin to Nesselrode, 6/18 Feb. 1831, ibid. report 15.

[64] Gennotte's list from the 1829 conclave (HHSA, b. 37, located inside letter [n. 72] 'Mémoire reserve rémis le 19 Fevrier 1829... de Gennotte', fos 80–3). M. le Vicomte de Lapasse, French emissary to Naples, wrote back to Paris calling Cappellari's election a victory for the moderates: De Lapasse, Naples, to Sebastiani, Paris: Armando Saitta, *Le Relazioni diplomatiche fra la Francia e il Regno delle Due Sicilie*, Rome 1966, 62, letter 29.

[65] Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Bunsen letter, 20 Jan. 1831 ('most deserving') and 5 Dec. 1830 ('wisdom' and 'negotiations'). HHSA, b. 40, n. 185A. Heinrich Graf von Lützow to Prince Klemens von Metternich, 29 Jan. 1831. Latour-Maubourg, called Cappellari '"the most satisfactory candidate"' because of his 'political and religious competence': Reinerman, *Austria and the papacy*, ii. 9; Feret, *La France et le Saint-Siège*, ii. 448 ('competence'). The British diplomat, Brook Taylor, in Rome in an unofficial capacity, claimed that the opposition to Cappellari centred principally around 'his being considered too liberal' : Taylor to Palmerston, 17 Apr. 1831, in Morelli, *La politica estera*, 183.

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Later Gregory was to exhibit similar flexibility in the Montel affair.[66] Diplomatic pressure from France forced Gregory's hand in determining whether to place a newly-baptised Jewish infant in an orphanage against his parents' wishes or to relent and allow the child to be placed under the care of the French (as the family was French). Prime Minister Adolphe Thiers threatened to go public with the affair and create a public relations scandal should the pontiff adhere closely to canon law and take the child away from his parents. In a show of prudence, the conservatively-inclined pope adopted a more pragmatic approach and relented, following promises made by the prime minister to meet certain face-saving conditions outlined by the pope.

Cappellari's open-mindedness where political considerations were concerned took precedence in his position as prefect of Propaganda (1826–30). The missionary Church, which he oversaw, operated in a minority position within non-Catholic societies. Cappellari had to sensitise himself to the political conditions in various non-Catholic lands in order to assess the risk of any particular directive from his office and the potential fallout.

Contributing to the hitherto rather over-simplified interpretation of Gregory was his penchant for secrecy. He was not prone to gossip or to sharing information with those not directly involved – as laudable a personal quality as it is unfortunate for the archival historian. He avoided at all costs public scrutiny in the Montel affair, following warnings from Thiers. So too, in the Biondi affair, Cappellari revealed his strong preference for restricting the flow of information only to those who needed to know.

Ironically, Gregory was more politically calculating than his successor turned out to be, despite Pio Nono's initial reputation for liberalism. In sharp contrast to Gregory's actions over the Montel child, in the Edgardo Mortara affair, Pius stubbornly reaffirmed the Church's decision to keep the young Jewish convert in a Catholic orphanage over the vociferous objections of his parents and the international community.[67] This action tainted his pontificate in a way that Gregory had wished to avoid. For Gregory, projecting a positive image of the Church to the rest of the world was critical if the Church were to fulfil its great commission. He was sensitive to this objective at least partly because of his time as prefect of Propaganda Fide. To achieve his aims he was even willing to compromise long-standing church practices.

[66] David Kertzer, 'The Montel Affair: Vatican Jewish policy and French diplomacy under the July Monarchy', *French Historical Studies* xxv (2002), 265–93, esp. pp. 279–80. Kertzer, however, assigns much of the flexibility for the curial decision to Gregory's secretary of state, Lambruschini (pp. 291–2).

[67] Idem, *The kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*, London 1997, chs ix, xiii.

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In a later reference to the Biondi affair, in 1842, following an inquiry into the matter by the government of Naples, Gregory still wanted secrecy. The whole family appeared to have been baptised and to be still together. A report of the response of the secretary of state, Luigi Lambruschini, to Naples, on 22 November 1842, reads:

> This is all that the Secretary of State is able to say … regarding the baptism of the woman and the children with an apostolic dispensation to contract the marriage. Nothing has to be communicated to the [Neapolitan] minister about the circumstances or the causes. And we know that this too is the sentiment of His Holiness.[68]

[68] 'La mente è che tutto al più possa l'Em.e Seg.o [Eminente Segretario] di Stato rispondere al Ministro di Napoli, essere stato il Calogero previa la Collazione del Battesimo alla donna, e figli abilitato con dispensa Aplica a contrarne Matrimonio, non debbano però comunicarsi affatto al Ministro le circostanze, e le cause, e sa questo stesso si senta l'oracolo di Sua Santità': Luigi Simonetta letter, 14 Dec. 1842, ACDF, DV, n. 120.

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