

PARISHES OF
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SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW
WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sunday 6th July 2025: 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time
The Leonine Popes: (3) Leo X

This is the third article in the series on some of the Leonine Popes who have preceded the present Leo XIV¹. Between Leo I and Leo IX, the subject of the first two articles, came some 600 years and 7 other Popes bearing the name. The Church then had to wait nearly 500 years for the next Leo, Leo X, who was in office between 1513 and 1521. He too became Pope at a time of great upheaval. The previous 20 years had witnessed the stirrings of the Reformation with two controversial Popes in charge – Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia) and, albeit to a lesser extent, Julius II, described by Professor Duffy as “*belligerent and worldly*”.

Leo X was only 37 when he became Pope. He was of the powerful Medici family, the second son of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Duffy says he was “*cultivated, peaceable and free from the grosser vices*”, Leo X settled a long-running dispute with the French crown in the Concordat of Bologna (1516). In it the payment of annual diocesan revenue (annates) to the Pope was restored and the Pope’s supremacy over General Council was acknowledged by the King; but the King had the right to appoint bishops, abbeys and major benefices. In reality this gave the French King great control over the French Church nationally.

In 1517 Erasmus published a hard-hitting satire on Julius II and in Wittenberg the unknown monk, Martin Luther, began a debate on indulgences which Julius II, followed by Leo X, used to fund the rebuilding of St Peter’s, Rome. The use of indulgences, by granting spiritual blessings in order to raise church funds, was a long-established practice. But the preaching of this indulgence was tarnished by grave corruption, particularly in Germany where clerics, including an Archbishop, kept for themselves a large share of the cash. Luther challenged not only this abuse but the whole practice of indulgences. With the recent advent of printing, Luther’s views denouncing indulgences spread like wildfire and developed into an attack on other aspects of Catholic teaching and practice.

¹ Articles based primarily on Professor Eamon Duffy’s Book: “*Saints & Sinners: A History of the Popes*” and the Catholica Encyclopaedia

Leo X did not realise how serious matters had become. He tried unsuccessfully to have Luther silenced by the Augustinian Order to which he belonged, then to remove the political protection which Prince Frederick of Saxony was granting him. In June 1520, he issued a Bull condemning 41 of Luther's challenges. This Bull Luther burned, whereupon Leo excommunicated him. This "nuclear" sanction did not have the usual desired effect of ending the rebellion. Professor Duffy says of Leo: "*The sophisticated Roman and Florentine worlds of classical learning and artistic patronage, the convoluted game of Italian dynastic politics in which the papacy must be a player if it was to survive at all, simply had not equipped him to appreciate the more immediate and existential anxieties of the earnest north of Europe*"

The Catholic Encyclopaedia is somewhat harsher in its criticism, stating: "*He paid no attention to the dangers threatening the papacy, and gave himself up unrestrainedly to amusements, that were provided in lavish abundance. He was possessed by an insatiable love of pleasure, that distinctive trait of his family. Music, the theatre, art, and poetry appealed to him as to any pampered worldling.*"

Leo X is, however, described as good-tempered, generous and cheerful, even in adversity. He was not ostentatious, and did not stand on dignity and ceremony. He was lavish in works of charity towards all sorts of deserving people and institutions, such as hospitals. This, unfortunately, resulted in a crisis in Vatican finances (which Julius II had left well in surplus) and, on his unexpected death in 1521, Leo's creditors faced financial ruin. Leo was highly cultivated and a great patron of the arts. He strictly fulfilled his spiritual duties and fasted 3 times a week. He was not sceptical or cynical and his personal conduct was considered to be irreproachable.

Leo X is pithily summarised in this sentence from the Catholic Encyclopaedia: "*His character shows a remarkable mingling of good and bad traits.*"

Stephen S.