



## St. Malachy

*When these things are finished,  
Rome will be destroyed, and the  
dreadful judge will judge his people.*

The Prophecies of St. Malachy

† THE SPECULATION ABOUT WHO would succeed Pope Benedict XVI began even before his election in 2005. As foretold by an ancient prophecy, it would be someone who would call himself Peter, a name no pope in history had ever dared to adopt.

*The Prophecy of the Popes*—long attributed to a twelfth century Irish archbishop named Malachy—consists of a series of short, cryptic phrases in Latin. Supposedly written after a divinely-inspired vision, the *Prophecy* purports to predict the names of the 112 popes (as well as a few antipopes) that would rule from the time of Malachy's day—Celestine II (1143-1144)—until the proverbial 'End of Time.'

First published in 1595 by Benedictine monk Arnold de Wyon, the prophecies were long ago exposed as forgeries, most likely written in the late 16th century, and quite possibly by de Wyon himself.

One rather persuasive theory maintains that the prophecies were commissioned by allies of Girolamo Simoncelli, in support of his bid to replace Urban VII in the papal conclave of 1590. (Urban VII has the dubious honor of having the shortest pontificate in history, a mere 12 days.)

In the prophecy, the pope after Urban is given the motto *Ex antiquitate urbis* (*From the old city*). Simoncelli was from Orvieto, which—sure enough—is *Urbevetanum* or 'old city' in Latin. What's more, de Wyon was a close friend of Simoncelli, and while the descriptions of popes prior to 1590 closely match, those that follow are so vague that they could apply to almost anyone.

If de Wyon did indeed secretly author the prophecies, his efforts to assist Simoncelli were in vain. After months of wrangling, the influence of Spain's powerful King Philip II prevailed, and the conclave dutifully settled on his choice, Niccolò Sfondrati. (The sickly Sfondrati was a reluctant participant in the whole affair: He burst into tears following his coronation, crying out to his electors: "God forgive you! What have you done?"—and expired from a gallstone less than a year later.) In fact, during more than five decades as a cardinal, Simoncelli was a seven-time loser in the papal sweepstakes.

Curiously, while many prominent Catholic theologians have denounced the *Prophecy*, the Church itself takes no official stance on the matter. In fact, the legend retains enough credence even among cardinal-electors that several papal candidates have had their resumes bolstered simply because they seemed to fulfill the prophecy's motto.

Most notably, New York's Cardinal Spellman sailed up and down the Tiber in a boat filled with sheep, in a rather shameless attempt to convince the conclave of 1958 that he was the '*pastor and mariner*' named as the next pope in line after Pius XII. Unfortunately, Angelo Roncalli had a lock on the title as bishop of Venice, '*City of Canals*.' (A sore loser, the conservative Spellman was critical of the new pope's reformist ideas throughout his pontificate. "He's no pope," he reportedly said of John XXIII, "He should be selling bananas.")

In 2005, when Joseph Ratzinger chose the name Benedict XVI in honor of the founder of the Benedictine order (despite not being a member), pope watchers noted that the motto for 'Pope #111' was *Glory of the olive*—and, miraculously, the order's coat of arms includes an olive branch.

When Benedict unexpectedly resigned in 2013, many fans of Malachy expected him to be replaced by either *Peter* Turkson of Ghana (making him the first black pope) or by Tarcisio *Pietro* Evasio Bertone, a personal favorite of Benedict.

Either of these two candidates would have fulfilled the prophecy, which predicted the new pope would call himself Peter II—*Petrus Romanus*, or *Peter the Roman*. Turkson, in fact, was the bookies' favorite. (Despite gambling on the outcome of papal conclaves having been banned in 1591—coincidentally, by Pope Gregory XIV, the aforementioned Niccolò Sfondrati—the custom, like the *Prophecy*, endures.)

To the punters' disappointment, Benedict's successor took the name Francis I, in honor of St. Francis of Assisi. But some insist that the prophecy still applies: St. Francis's birth name is Giovanni di *Pietro* di Bernardone.

On the other hand, perhaps the old adage 'be careful what you wish for' applies, because according to the *Prophecy* the current pope will in fact be the last, and his reign will coincide with the complete destruction of Rome and the Holy See, as foretold in the *Book of Revelation*.

Ironically, Malachy is considered by many Catholics to be a legitimate prophet, having correctly predicted that Ireland would be oppressed by England for seven centuries, after which England would 'suffer a chastisement' and Ireland would help restore the Catholic faith to England.

Perhaps the last word should go to the etymologists, those who study the origins of words. Many believe the popular expression *malarkey* (signifying *nonsense*) originated from the name 'Malachy'—presumably because that was how most non-believers viewed the prophecies attributed to him. ■