

*Zombie Pope, by underworlddreamer, deviantart.com*

# Unholy Trinity

*A demon from hell in the disguise of a priest … That wretch, from the beginning of his pontificate to the end of his life, feasted on immorality.*
Peter Damien on Pope Benedict IX, c. 1051

THE HALF-CENTURY REIGN OF THE powerful Crescenzi family of Rome ended with the murder of Pope Sergius IV in 1012. Sergius was succeeded by Benedict VIII, the nephew of John XII and great grandson of the notorious Marozia.

Benedict was opposed by a challenger calling himself Gregory VI, but when Gregory petitioned the German king, Henry II, for support, Henry restored Benedict instead. (Benedict obligingly crowned Henry as Holy Roman emperor a year later.)

When Benedict died in 1024, his brother Romanus bribed his way into the papacy, taking the uninspired name of John XIX. Romanus wasn't even a priest, but that was no obstacle: he was made a deacon, priest, bishop, and finally pope all in one day—which still stands as a world record.

John XIX died under (the now-routine) suspicious circumstances in 1032, and Benedict's father, Alberic III, bribed the Roman clergy into electing as pope his son, who took the name Benedict IX.

Benedict's age is disputed, but according to the most reliable contemporary sources he was probably about 12 years old. What is not in dispute is that his reign was among the worst in the entire history of the papacy. (He also holds the distinction of serving a record three non-consecutive terms.)

Accused of witchcraft, rape, murder and routine bestiality, Benedict was called by one later pope, Victor III, "so vile, so foul, so execrable that I shudder to think of it."

Said to have held regular orgies in the Lateran Palace, Benedict was as tenacious as he was immoral. Favors granted to Holy Roman emperors Conrad II and Henry III afforded him protection from his many enemies and helped him survive several coups and assassination plots, including one foiled attempt to strangle him at the altar.

No strangers to corruption and debauchery, the outraged Romans nonetheless deposed Benedict, driving him out of Rome in 1044.

After fierce and protracted infighting, a bishop who took the name Sylvester III was elected to take his place, but Benedict amassed a small army and returned less than two months later to regain the papal throne. (Despite losing the papacy to another recognized pope, the Church continues to regard Sylvester's papacy as legitimate.)

Apparently harboring a strong desire to be pope himself, Benedict's godfather, the archpriest John Gratian, bribed his way into the office by offering Benedict 1,500 pounds of gold to abdicate. (Some sources claim that Benedict, now 25, wanted to be free to marry his cousin, but considering the circumstances of his pontificate, being pope would hardly have prevented that.)

Gratian took the name Gregory VI, the moniker having since been conveniently discarded by the aforementioned antipope. A year later—perhaps growing bored of married life and missing the perks of the papacy—Benedict returned to reclaim his title, using his sizeable cache of gold to bribe the required number of electors.

Taking advantage of all the confusion, Sylvester also returned to reassert his claim, so now there were an unprecedented *three* claimants to the papacy, each of them occupying a palace in the city and each possessing a loyal retinue of supporters.

Finding three popes at least two too many—and sorely in need of an uncontested pope to crown him emperor after a vacancy of six years—King Henry III of Germany finally intervened in 1046, arriving in Italy with a large army and summoning Gregory, Benedict, and Sylvester to a council on the outskirts of Rome. Only the latter two contenders attended, and both claims were immediately rejected. (Benedict was subsequently exiled and Sylvester confined to a monastery for the remainder of his life.)

That left only Gregory, who was forced to resign for having illegally purchased the papacy from his godson. Henry installed a German bishop as Clement II, whose first official act as pope was—not surprisingly—to crown Henry as Holy Roman Emperor.

Clement died less than a year later, succumbing to lead poisoning at age 42. (Benedict was suspected, but lead was widely used in those days as a treatment for venereal disease, so Clement's premature demise was probably self-inflicted.)

Sensing the opportunity for a sort of papal 'hat-trick,' Benedict hastily returned and bribed his way back onto the throne for a record third time in 1047, but Henry's troops ousted him eight months later and installed Damasus II. Failing an attempt to gain a fourth term, Benedict disappeared into obscurity, with some sources claiming (rather dubiously) that he repented in later life and retreated to a monastery.

In any case, thus ended the reign of not only probably the youngest of all the popes, but the first to serve more than one term, the first to sell his office, and the first to resign.

Dante, who consigned numerous popes to Hell in *The Divine Comedy*, considered Benedict to be rock bottom for the papacy. But arguably, the worst was yet to come. ■