A learned theologian, affable and approachable, Pope Benedict XIV was a patron of the arts and sciences who regularized mixed marriages during his tenure and instructed boards of censorship to avoid excessive zeal.

When he died on May 3, 1758, all of Rome mourned him as "a priest without insolence or interest, a prince without favorites, a pope without nephews."

Many pontiffs did not receive -- or deserve -- such praise. In the 2,000-year history of the Roman Catholic Church, John Julius Norwich, historian, travel writer and member of England's House of Lords, indicates that the men who donned the tiara have ranged from the devout to the depraved, the sophisticated to the simple-minded, reformers to reactionaries.

Mr. Norwich introduces us to every one of them, including Joan, the woman who was said to have reigned (as John) from 855-857. The author is not a scholar, meaning he does not pretend to have unearthed new information or to advance a fresh interpretation of the papacy.

Episodic rather than thematic, and far more interested in politics than theology, his book is designed for the "average intelligent reader" with an interest in one of the most incredible institutions ever created.

Although he tells some tall tales himself, Mr. Norwich punctures some myths. The triumph of Pope Gregory VII over King Henry IV, who allegedly stood, barefoot and in sackcloth, shivering in the snow at Canossa in 1077, was, he writes, "a cold-blooded maneuver which was necessary to secure his crown."

Lucrezia Borgia, Mr. Norwich suggests, may have been "the hapless instrument" of the ambitions of her father and brother, not a femme fatale. Despite their villainy, moreover, the Borgias deserve "the gratitude of posterity" for providing the papacy in the early 1500s with "desperately needed finance, firm administration and astute diplomacy."

"Absolute Monarchs" also has more than a few arresting anecdotes. As a young man, Mr. Norwich notes, John XXIII was a pirate. While serving as papal legatee in Bologna, rumor had it, he had seduced 200 matrons, widows and virgins, and "an alarming number of nuns." Denied a place on the canonical list of popes because of the circumstances of his election (he was one of two rival pontiffs in 1410) and the fact that he was subsequently deposed, John was forgotten until Cardinal Angelo Roncalli surprised everyone and appropriated the name when he became pope in 1958.

Informative, and, at times, charming, "Absolute Monarchs" is, alas, often dull, a forced march from pope to pope to pope, accompanied by a formidable -- and often forgettable -- list of kings, emperors, heretics, bishoprics, pretenders, contenders, crusaders and invaders.
Nor does Mr. Norwich provide an adequate political or institutional context for his narrative. He says virtually nothing about when and how the papacy became "legitimized." He does not examine the evolving role of the Sacred College of Cardinals in electing the pope. He says precious little about church finances. He does not analyze the shift from use of political and military power by popes to the exercise of (mostly moral and spiritual) influence.

These days, of course, popes are not absolute monarchs. Revelations about the sexual abuse of children in schools and orphanages and sharp disagreement with John Paul II and Benedict XVI over contraception, abortion and homosexuality have resulted in a crisis of confidence. Off to a shaky start, the new pope is, at times, revered -- and then ignored.

Nonetheless, as Mr. Norwich reminds us, with 2 billion members (and about one-sixth of the world's population), the church and its Holy Father are a good bet to be around 2,000 years from now.

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