

## POPE ST PIUS V

**P**ius V has been described as “the greatest pope of the Counter Reformation” and, by others, as “the most hated pope of the sixteenth century.” Of course, it is quite possible that both descriptions are true.

**Antonio Ghislieri**, as he was christened, was genuinely and profoundly in love with God and the Catholic faith. He took seriously the injunctions of scripture and the saints in regard to pray, simplicity of life and austerity. Of course, to some he was then an exemplary saint, to others a fanatic. But no one doubted that if he could be a hard taskmaster, he was harder on himself than on anyone else.

As a Dominican friar – he joined the Order at fourteen - he fasted, did penance, passed long hours of the night in meditation and prayer, travelled on foot without a cloak and in deep silence, speaking only to God or about God, as had been said of St Dominic.

As an Inquisitor of the Holy Inquisition, he presided over practices like torture that we could never accept today; it was not done for cruelty, but because he truly believed it might save an immortal soul. If we find that way of thinking bizarre, I suppose we simply have to say that every society has its moral blindnesses, and we are not lacking them in our own society: they are just different. Ghislieri called the shots as he saw them. His defense of Bartolomé Carranza, Archbishop of Toledo, who had been suspected of heresy by the Spanish Inquisition, earned him a rebuff from the pope.

As Pope – his election was encouraged by St Charles Borromeo, among others – he undertook the herculean task of reform of a church which was in many ways corrupt, and nearly destroyed by the Protestant Reformation. He reformed the liturgy, and devotions like the Rosary, organised seminaries, ordered the first edition of the *Opera Omnia* of St Thomas Aquinas, insisted that bishops live in their dioceses, battled nepotism, and, of course, managed to negotiate the Holy League, an alliance of Catholic states whose combined fleet drove back the Ottoman invaders at the Battle of Lepanto, thus saving Europe from Muslim invasion.

He literally drained the swamps around Rome, thus eliminating the source of malaria and other diseases., but he also “drained the swamp”, to use a modern metaphor, of the luxuriant Papal court, sent the Papal Jester packing – there hasn’t been one since – and banned horse racing in St Peter’s Square, and bull fighting, too. In the time of a famine in Rome, he imported wheat at his own expense from Sicily and France [...]; much of which he distributed among the poor, gratis, and sold the rest to the public below cost.

I leave you with Blessed Henry John Newman’s summation of the man: *Pius V was stern and severe, as far as a heart burning and melted with divine love could be ... Yet such energy and vigour as his were necessary for the times. He was a soldier of Christ in a time of insurrection and rebellion, when in a spiritual sense, martial law was proclaimed.*

–Martin Wallace OP  
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