

pope benedict xiv — friend of the medical profession

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In the Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine in London, there is an old microscope which once belonged to Prospero Lambertini, later Pope Benedict XIV. Born in Bologna in 1675, he became a priest and a canon lawyer, worked in Rome as advisor to various Congregations and Popes and as a member of the Congregation of Rites, was made Bishop of Ancona, and later Cardinal Archbishop of his native city from where he was unexpectedly elected Pope in 1740.

Reading his life I was struck by the number of resemblances he bore to Pope John XXIII, so that I said to myself, "Here was a Pope John of the 18th century". But it is not on this that I wish to dwell here. What interests us here is his patronage of medicine and surgery, as well as the sciences.

In an age when there was not yet the separation between the "two cultures" of C.P. Snow and when narrow specialisation was not yet possible, besides being a humanist, Lambertini was also interested in astronomy, electrical research (then in its infancy) and geology. He was particularly fascinated by medicine and surgery and by what is now called parapsychology. He developed these interests especially when he was Devil's Advocate, so called, in the Congregation of Rites. This official's duties in the processes of beatification and canonization is to make all-out efforts to prevent the process from continuing by trying to discover proofs against the heroic holiness of the candidate, or if this is established, to show that alleged miracles never happened but were exaggerations or distortions. Lambertini's duties as Devil's Advocate obliged him to consult men learned in anatomy, medicine, physics and parapsychology as well as to study these sciences for himself. For example we know that he read Harvey and Boyle.

Perhaps his interest had already started in Bologna as his native city possessed one of the most famous of medical schools (founded in 1200) especially prominent in anatomy and surgery. Always on friendly terms with the University, in his eagerness further to encourage the study of anatomy and surgery, Cardinal Prospero Lambertini, when Archbishop of Bologna, had published an edict meant to facilitate the supply of cadavers for the purpose of dissection. In it he declared that though it had always been considered permissible to dissect the bodies of men executed for their crimes, there had arisen some confusion over dissection in general. This was due to a ruling of Pope Boniface VIII in 1299 being wrongly interpreted. He argued that that ruling had nothing to do with dissection for purposes of medical training, but was directed against such practices as grave robbery. Ordinary dissection for medical purposes had begun

with papal approval already in 1315, while Clement VII in 1531 had issued further regulations concerning it. He recalled that St. Francis de Sales had wished to donate his body for dissection to the Medical School of Padua.

In Bologna, Lambertini founded a school of anatomy and commissioned and paid for a number of models to be used in instruction in the Anatomical Museum set up in the Institute of Sciences, while on various occasions he donated sets of surgical instruments to the school. Prospero Lambertini insisted that though other subjects might be taught "in a speculative and theoretical manner" anatomy could not. Lectures in his school were to be followed, as far as possible, by dissections made by "a qualified anatomist" and in all cases to be followed by a practical demonstration of all points the lecturer had spoken about.

Of course, Lambertini's interest in medicine and surgery was not due principally to his scientific bent. He encouraged them because, as was his duty, he was concerned about suffering people, especially the ill. In fact, he also endowed hospitals and added new wings to them; visited the ill in them and formed associations of priests and laymen to visit them.

On the other hand, as Pope he refused to make inoculation against small-pox obligatory by law in the Papal States, as was suggested to him. Unlike vaccination against small-pox, which method had not yet been discovered, inoculation was sometimes dangerous. This was the reason why, although he advised his subjects to be inoculated against small-pox, he refused to oblige them by law.

Quite remarkable for the age, was his encouragement of girls to study. Thus he encouraged a certain Laura Bassi in her lectures in "natural philosophy" as the natural sciences were then called, at a time when an academic career was very unusual for a woman. Laura continued teaching even after she married a doctor and had several children. At his suggestion too, Maria Gaetana Agnesi was offered the Chair of Mathematics by the University of Bologna. Urging her to accept the Chair he wrote to her, "We are most happy to see your sex drawn to illuminate both science and your own talents".

In ecclesiastical circles, Prospero Lambertini is best known for his book, "Of the Beatification of the Servants of God and of the Canonisation of the Blessed" still the standard authority in its line. In it, he shows that far from being eager to accept miracles, the Church carefully and sceptically sifts any marvellous happenings using the services of independent doctors and scientists. An anecdote is an example of Lambertini's attitude. He was once

sitting on a commission investigating the case of a nun who insisted that she was living without food. In the course of the proceedings he put her the blunt but logical question whether she had bowel movements every day. Following her reply in the affirmative, he went on to show her up as a fake. This attitude pervades his book which is full of interesting examples of events and phenomena on which he gives common sense and scientific conclusions.

Like Pope John, he was a very loveable man, with a genius for making friends. Unassuming in his manners and a reformer in Church matters,

a good priest, bishop and Pope he was never quite able to overcome his quick temper as he himself acknowledged. After his death, in 1758, Prospero Lambertini was described by Horace Walpole as "beloved by Papists, esteemed by Protestants . . . , a man whom neither Wit nor Power could spoil".

I have culled the above items, interesting to medical men, from the gripping biography by Renée Haynes which appeared a few years ago under the title of "Philosopher King: the Humanist Pope Benedict XIV".