Paul the Venetian’s Hollywood Hit Piece: Why The History of the Council of Trent Isn’t Really a History

Setting the Stage

The History of the Council of Trent was written by Paolo Sarpi, a Venetian statesman and theologian. The origins of the book revolve around the Venetian Interdict of 1606-1607, a Papal response to Venice limiting the power of the Papacy within its borders. Sarpi, a consultor to the Venetian government with a possible personal vendetta against the church, came to Venice’s defense. During his days as a friar, Sarpi was nominated twice for Bishopric of Caorle, but was rejected both times by the Vatican. Sarpi’s efforts were wildly successful, raising concerns of both religious moderates and opponents of the Vatican across Europe. Perhaps the biggest event that led to the creation of the book was an assassination attempt on Sarpi in 1607 by the Pope, in which he was stabbed fifteen times and left for dead in the street.

Sarpi’s Argument

In The History of the Council of Trent, Sarpi criticized the operations of the Curia, the administrative arm of the Catholic Church. The Curia was Sarpi’s main target as he detailed specific transactions and showed their lack of biblical correlation. Given the shrewd statesman that he was, Sarpi also used the book to influence Protestants to ally with Venice against Rome and Spain. The Church viewed him as crypto-Protestant and enemy to the state due to the way the book impressed Europe’s Protestants.

The Vatican’s Rebuttal

The Catholic Church was outraged by The History of the Council of Trent and its criticism of the Church. In 1657, the Vatican opened its archives to Cardinal Sforza Pallavicino in order to write a three-volume rebuttal to the book. In the rebuttal, Pallavicino accuses Sarpi of spreading Protestant beliefs and claims that Sarpi’s sources were unreliable or non-existent.

In 1949, another history of the Council of Trent was authorized to be written by historian Hubert Jedin.

“Esto Perpetua” (“may she [the republic] live forever”)

Conclusion

Paolo Sarpi had many intentions for The History of the Council of Trent, among them to criticize the Roman Catholic Church and the Curia’s undue overreach into Venetian sovereignty and send a message to Protestant nations in Europe to ally with Venice. Although a rebuttal was written, ultimately the work helped Venice politically and Protestants rejoiced in reading it.

References:
- The History of the Council of Trent (translated into English), 1676. MATCH 26/4/14. Utah State University. Special Collections and Archives Department.