

Monumenta Borgia: Sanctus Franciscus Borgia quartus Gandiae Dux et Societatis Iesu Praepositus Generalis tertius

Review Number:

1010

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 December, 2010

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Editor:

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ISBN:

8448233549

Date of Publication:

2003

Price:

£30.00

Pages:

751pp.

Publisher:

Generalitat Valenciana

Place of Publication:

Valencia

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ISBN:

9788448251857

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858pp.

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St Francis Borja – in Spanish, S. Francisco de Borja – IV Duke of Gandia and III General of the Society of Jesus (1510–1566) was one of the most interesting and influential men of the Spanish 16th century. Head of

one of the senior noble families of Spain, he had a dazzling political and courtly career before renouncing the world in 1551 to enter the Society of Jesus; he was one of the closest collaborators of Ignatius of Loyola in establishing the new Society and he spent his last years (1565–72) as its General. His extraordinary career was not untouched by scandal and tribulation, for in 1559 he became one of the most eminent victims of the Spanish Inquisition when it placed his writings on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*; he had to flee from Spain in fear of his life. Borja left an enduring impression not just on the Society of Jesus but on the city of Rome itself; he began the construction of the *Gesù*, the church of the Society (and the pantheon of the Borja family) and created the Roman College – the future Gregorian University.

Ascetic and devout as he was, Francisco de Borja was one of the most talented of networkers; he knew virtually every one who was anyone in Church and State in Spain in the middle decades of the 16th century. He was an intimate of the Spanish royal family – confidant and testamentary of the Emperor (and King of Spain) Charles V and of his wife Isabella; tutor to the future Philip II and spiritual director to Philip's sister Juana. He was closely associated with many of the leading figures of government in Spain, most especially with Francisco de los Cobos, secretary of the Emperor, and Ruy Gómez de Silva, Prince of Éboli, favourite of Philip II; he thus had access to the very core of the Spanish governmental apparatus. In his spiritual life, Borja was a friend or associate of a whole swathe of Catholic Reformation saints, notably Teresa of Avila, Charles Borromeo, Robert Belarmine, but – above all, of course, of Ignatius of Loyola, who was both friend and mentor. Intriguingly, Borja's generalship of the Society of Jesus coincided almost exactly with the pontificate of St Pius V (1566–72); the two extraordinary men worked closely together.

This unrivalled range of networks makes the publication of Borja's correspondence of quite unique importance in both religious and secular spheres. In 1894 the Society of Jesus began publishing Borja's correspondence and family papers in its enormous series *Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu*. By 1911, four volumes had appeared as the *Monumenta Borgia*; they took the story only as far as Borja's birth in 1510. There, for nearly 100 years, the project stalled. Happily, the original volumes are now available online, republished by American Libraries in their 'Ebook and Texts Archive'.⁽¹⁾ More happily still, Enrique García Hernán has undertaken the prodigious task of continuing the project into Borja's own life and now presents us with volumes six and seven of the series.

The first of these deals with Borja's secular career and is based substantially upon papers in Spanish archives, while the second deals with his religious life up to 1566 and is essentially focussed on papers from the Roman archive of the Society of Jesus ('*Archivo Romano de la Compañía de Jesus*'). Naturally, in this second volume there is a preponderance of material on the years after Borja became General of the Society in 1565. Each volume has over 1000 documents – most of them in transcript – and Dr García Hernán is to be heartily congratulated on the range and quality of the research and upon the exemplary manner in which the documents are presented and catalogued. There are few occasions when the word 'magnificent' can be appropriately employed to describe a historical enterprise: this is one of them.

Francisco de Borja was born in Gandia in the kingdom of Valencia in 1510. Royal blood ran in his veins – his mother was a granddaughter of Ferdinand the Catholic – but so, too, did papal blood, for the Borjas were descended from the most infamous of all popes, and although they hispanicised their name there was no forgetting that their forbears included Rodrigo de Borgia, Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503). For good measure, they were also able to count Pope Calixtus III (1456–1458) as a relative. It is tempting to think that it was familial shame at these origins that stimulated the extraordinary religiosity of the Spanish branch of the family, which produced a host of cardinals and bishops, priests, nuns and religious. Of these, the most celebrated was Francisco de Borja himself; he was beatified in 1624 and canonised in 1671.

Francisco entered the circle of Charles V shortly after his return to Spain for the first time as Holy Roman Emperor (1522), and soon became an intimate friend of his and subsequently of his wife, Isabella of Portugal. He was named as a gentleman of Isabella's court and later became her chief steward. Borja formed a deep attachment to the Empress and when she died unexpectedly in 1539 he was profoundly affected: he later described 1 May 1539 – the day of her death – as the day of his 'conversion', of his decision to renounce the secular world to enter into the religious life. More immediately, it fell to him to accompany

Isabella's body to its burial in Granada; he had to open the coffin to authenticate her identity before interment and was deeply shaken by the grisly spectacle that confronted him.

As a married man and as heir to one of the great ducal titles of Spain, Borja was not free to carelessly abandon the world but he determined that if his wife Leonor should predecease him he would renounce his titles and enter the religious life. It may have been in an attempt to dissuade him from leaving political life that Charles appointed him Viceroy of Catalonia (1539–43). In 1543 he succeeded his father to the dukedom of Gandia and Charles commanded him to come to court to take part in the education of the future Philip II. So successfully did Borja entrench himself at the heart of the royal family that he not only carried out this role but also became a spiritual adviser to Charles's daughter Juana; in time, Juana would become the only female ever to be admitted into the Society of Jesus. .

Leonor died in March 1546 and Borja decided within weeks that he would enter the Society of Jesus; he took his first vows in June 1546 and then in 1548 – in conditions of the greatest secrecy – professed his vows. He fled from Spain in 1550, under threat now from the Inquisition (which was inveterately hostile to the Society of Jesus and may have known of his admission to it). He returned to Spain in 1551, renounced his dukedom and was ordained as a priest. His action was one of the sensations of the age in Spain, and there was much talk of his saintliness. The first of the two volumes of the new *Monumenta Borgia* take us up to this point from 1478. The volume incorporates a vast amount of information in the form of familial, religious and governmental papers and letters. The family papers reveal a great deal about the relationships within the family; particularly interesting are the instructions that Francisco's father drew up for him to guide his life, differentiating between how to behave towards God, towards his colleagues at court and towards women (p. 141) and those that he presented him with when he married (p. 156). The estates of the family are well-represented; there are important papers on the acquisition and sale of lands and the grants of titles and privileges by the crown. There are many documents that provide insight into the nature of the religious patronage exercised by the Borja family; devout as they were they were often hard-nosed in their control of their ecclesiastical endowments.

Charles V constantly appears, and we are reminded here that he was one of the great letter- and memorandum-writers of Europe, attempting to govern all his kingdoms in minute detail while being restlessly on the move between them. There are intimate glimpses, too, of the royal family: when the Empress Isabella became pregnant with the future Philip II, Charles announced that he and his court would stay in Granada until the child was born, so as not to jeopardise the health of his wife by travelling: the affairs of Europe could hang fire until the Empress had given birth! The statesmen who governed Spain while Charles was abroad are well represented; this is especially true of Borja's close friend Francisco de los Cobos, who (like Charles V) lived with his pen in his hand, scribbling memoranda which are often distinguished by the remarkable lack of verbs – some of his letters seems almost to represent streams of consciousness, hurriedly dealing with major matters with the most economical use of words. When Borja became Viceroy of Catalonia in 1539 we find him working closely with the Council of Aragon and preparing position papers on how to deal with the Cortes of Valencia and mediate between the kingdom of Valencia and the government in Valladolid or Toledo. There are, too, some intellectual gems, notably the thoughts of Juan Luis Vives as he pondered whether to write a tract on the education and upbringing of men to complement his celebrated volume on the education of women (p. 153). Eventually he clearly decided that it was not worth the trouble.

Volume seven is essentially about Borja's role within the Society of Jesus. There is therefore nothing here – disappointingly – about his role in comforting Charles V in his decline and retirement into the Jeronimite monastery in Yuste. Borja was one of the first two people to know about Charles's intention to abdicate his imperial and kingly titles so that he could devote his last years to the contemplation of eternity – and how singular Borja's own role must have been in stimulating the Emperor into forming this extraordinary project.

Borja was elected General of the Society of Jesus in July 1565. He laid special emphasis on stimulating scholarship and learning within the Society and revised and completed the Rules of the Society, publishing the *Constituciones* in 1570. He imposed the hour of prayer on all members of the Society. He is seen here

regulating in detail the conduct of houses across Europe and instituting new foundations, one of them in Poland. He has developed from the Erasmian of his early years to the stern post-Tridentine churchman of the Catholic Reformation; as volume seven of this extraordinary project closes, we see Borja at the height of his powers – but with six more years in control of the Society of Jesus. The words *monumenta* recur in the series and in the title and it is appropriate : this is truly monumental scholarship and will be of enduring value. It will take its place among the great collections of documents that have provided such a profoundly firm bedrock for the study of Spanish history in this period. Moreover, at a price of 35 euros each the volumes are eminently affordable by both academic libraries and individual scholars; they should be quickly snapped up.

Notes

1. American Libraries, *Ebook and Texts Archive* <<http://www.archive.org/details/sanctusfranciscu58borj> [3]> [accessed 6 October 2010].[Back to \(1\)](#)

The editor is happy to accept the review and does not wish to comment on it.

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