When two Italian authors claimed to have proof that Pope Innocent XI financed the Protestant invasion of England, it was a sensation. But have they fallen victim to an unholy alliance between politicians and the Church? Peter Popham reports

On the streets of Rome the centuries stand still. Everything seems to have been set in place the lofty statues and gilded carvings, the high altars, the gorgeous paintings, the towering churches: yet nothing has ever been as it appears. Nothing can conquer the hidden passions of the past, the bonds of power that lie quietly dormant behind the arms of history.

Rita Marcelli and Francesco Sottirz are among the uniquely Roman novelists. Historical novelists who happen to be married to each other, they write comedies, and in 2003, their first novel and the book that made their name known in Rome, is set in France in 1681 and is an exploration of the world of diplomacy and intrigue.

An inn in Jersey has been put under quarantine, the doors barricaded with no guests inside, because someone died and the city has a terror of the plague.

Sealed in the house with no escape, an enlivened kitchen boy with ambitions to become a "guarantor", and an odd assortment of fugitives: Atto Mielini, an asbest to an untrained eye, a road-murdered Englishwoman, a fugitive from French authorities, a young refugee, and a young girl in circumvention of her parents, and the innkeeper, flee France, and the talk turns to politics, and the story of Louis XIV, and the story of how, in the days of Louis XIV, there was a secret passage of a group of French noblemen to escape the persecution of the Catholic Church.

The story starts on the scene of the murder of the Pope of the times, Innocent XI, and Louis XIV of France, and on the fact that Marcelli and Sottirz insist that there are established lepers who doubt that it is a fact. In 2003, Innocent XI forbade the invasion of England by William of Orange, but also the downfall of James II and the (Catholic) Stuart, the triumph of the Protestants, and the threat of British invasion as a force in English politics.

That is the theme of the story, and 300 years later - because Rome is the capital of the world, and the pope that controls it is eternal - it becomes the theme of the novel.

Because they claim that Innocent XI, Benedict and his brother before he was enthroned, financed the Protestant invasion of England in his sensational claim, and now the Church cannot reconcile itself, even today.

For the Catholic Church, Innocent has always been one of the greatest popes, and his commitment to entreating the Church in Europe but, in particular, for overthrowing enough money and political energy into the defense of Venice to repel the Turkish siege of 1687.
The somewhat stillt narrative style of the novel takes getting used to but it's richness and de
tail repay the effort. And, despite its fascination with the minutiae of the lives of the times, Impri
mator is also an intensely politi
cal book, which culminates in the narrator's apocalyptic revelations that the Catholic world has been betrayed by the Pope himself. "It had all started almost 30 years ago," the narrator reveals. "It was then..." the Odescalchi family had been
icted itself with the most prom
nous of cross-cultural behav
or. "It was about 1660... The House of Orange was, as ever, short of money. To give an idea of what that meant, William's mother and grandmother had
nancially exhausted all the family jewels. "After a series of highly secret negotiations... the House of Orange turned to the Odescalchi. They
were the most solvent money
keepers in Italy. Thus the years of heredity: Ieland were fi
tanced by the Catholic family of Cardinal Odescalchi, the future Pope Innocent XII."

The publishing house owned by the Berlusconi company Fininvest, bought the Italian rights to...