Gothic take on Innocent's guilt

Frank Campbell

Imprimatur
By Rita Monaldi and Francesco Sorti
Polygon (Birlinn), 608pp, $39.95

IMPRIMATUR first appeared in 2002 and has since been translated into 20 languages. A bestseller, its belated publication in English is courtesy of Birlinn, "publisher of a variety of books related to Scotland". For a book that knocked *The Da Vinci Code* off its perch, this is a strange wormhole to the Anglosphere.

Rita Monaldi and Francesco Sorti are Italian revisionist historians who use the medium of the novel. They plan a series of seven. *Secretum* and *Veritas* have already joined *Imprimatur*. Peter Greenaway intends to film each of the novels.

Imprimatur is a massive, elegant, baroque edifice. Superbly written and researched, it evokes 17th-century Roman life in all its malodorous complexity. Often compared with Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, it generally deserves the praise lavished on it by European newspapers such as *Le Monde*, *L'Express* and *El Mundo*. Not everyone will appreciate *Imprimatur*'s convoluted self-indulgence, but that's baroque for you. Lean, spare prose it is not.

Imprimatur is as genuine as *The Da Vinci Code* is phony, which is precisely why the incense hit the fan in Italy. The book has been boycotted by the oligopolistic Italian media and publishing industry, backed by the Vatican and the state.

The way the authors tell it, pope Innocent XI was about to be canonised in 2001 because he saved Europe from Islam in 1683 by orchestrating the Christian victory over the Ottoman Empire at the gates of Vienna. The advent of *Imprimatur*, exposing Innocent's guilt, spoiled the party. *Imprimatur* overturned centuries of papal hagiography. A minor priest, Innocent's agent in Vienna, was made a saint instead.

Innocent's sins were indeed grave. The essence of the story is that he came from a family of bankers and continued to play fiscal games across Europe as pope, hypocritically banning usury in 1682, neatly putting his competitors out of business.

Worse, he plotted against French Catholic king Louis XIV in favour of the impecunious but bellicose Protestant William of Orange. Innocent's secret loans to Bill Citrus could be repaid only by taking the crown of England from Catholic James II in the invasion of 1688. Thus the pope subverted Catholicism.

That's the big picture, but the Vatican and the Italian state had other reasons to punish Monaldi and Sorti. The devil is in the detail.

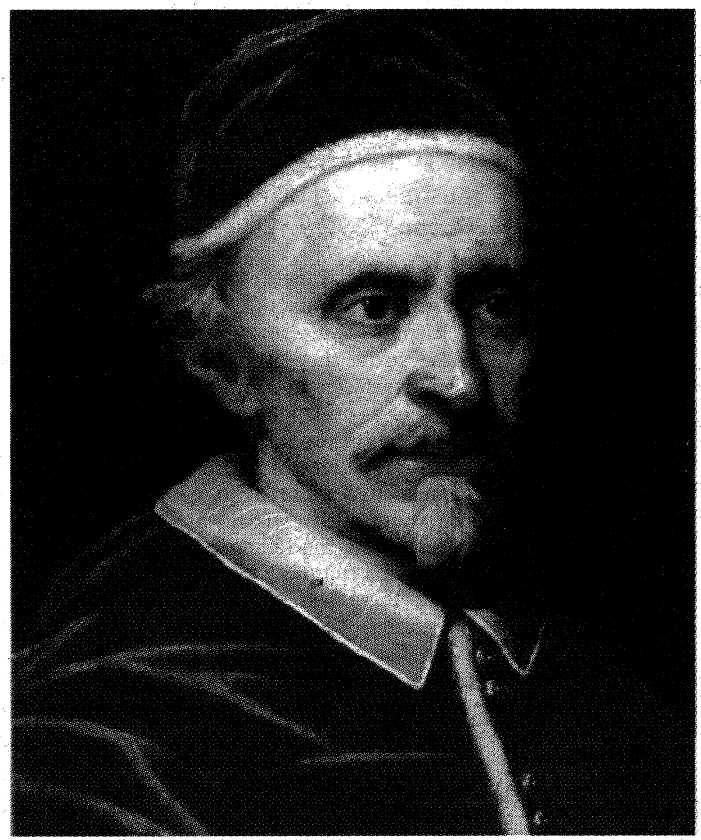
A motley crew of characters is trapped in a Roman inn, barricaded by the authorities because of a plague scare. Two key characters are clerics. One is a gluttonous, cowardly, casuistical Jesuit: three adjectives guaranteed to infuriate an order founded on asceticism, courage and logic. The other is a scheming abbot, "no simple sodomite" but a castrato who may be more loyal to the French king than to the pope or, then again, he may be a double agent. Whichever, he is a moral quagmire.

The action at the inn takes place during 12 claustrophobic days. Every guest is a suspect, a la Agatha Christie. Each appears to the apprentice inn-keeper, the real innocent of the story, to be at first a paragon of virtue, then a bestial fiend. There is no moral compass in this abyss of deceit.

Imprimatur is routinely described as a thriller. It is not. True, there are moments of drama and ample mystery, but the book is more gothic satire than cloak and dagger.

The targets are, of course, church and state, portrayed as profoundly corrupt, preying on the fears and credulity of the populace. Given the terminal incompetence of the Italian state and the vast, pompous accretion that is the Catholic Church, it's no wonder these institutions imagine their modern selves to be pilloried in the book. After all, the Vatican has everything except a sense of humour.

And *Imprimatur* is funny. High-minded satire gives way to broad comedy and finally slapstick as secret tunnels are discovered and the guests make forays into the underworld of the Roman sewer system. The scarcely human denizens of the sewers team up with our heroes in stumbling comic adventures, always scampering back to



Sins of the father: The not so saintly Pope Innocent XI Picture: Getty Images

base before the plague rollcall is due. Divine rods twitch magnetically. Astrological predictions cause mayhem. A cure for the plague is found in a piece of music and a crazed alchemist in his sewer-lab distils essence of rat to kill the pope.

Imprimatur is the full Monty Python.

Amid all this raucous good fun there are long disquisitions on food, medicine and incestuous royalty. If sanguinary janissaries and angelic electuaries are to your taste, *Imprimatur* is a banquet. The authors even take time out to mock the obsessions of Italian regional cooking. If you revel in the credulities of a past age, *Imprimatur* makes you grateful for the 21st century. I'd rather live in Sydney than in 17th-century Rome.

Imprimatur is many things: anti-clerical tract, Chaucerian comedy, whodunit, history thesis and Dickensian dose of urban underbelly. Perhaps it is also an allegory of modern times in Italy. Silvio Berlusconi and Joseph Ratzinger seem to think so.

But this book isn't for everyone. Will it be a bestseller in English? Do we give a toss about papal skulduggery? We'll see.

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