

The Character of Pope Vigilius

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The character of Pope Vigilius (537-55) is one much maligned by certain historians. He is perceived by some to have been ambitious and easily swayed by public opinion. The circumstances of his being elected to the papacy and his broken promises to the Monophysites would speak badly of his character. However, his behavior in the conflict of the Three Chapters shows this not to be entirely true. His defiance of the emperor and subsequent imprisonment are certainly not consistent with this picture of his character. It would certainly appear that he was not wholly without principles that he was prepared to uphold.

The attitude of historians to Pope Vigilius has largely been negative. He is seen by many historians to have been guided only by his ambition and what he believed to be in his own best interest. In his book *Theodora*, Anthony Bridge states of Vigilius that

[H]e had no morals at all, either good or bad, and as for firmness of either character or resolve, he was about as steady as a wisp of straw in a high wind. Ever ready to enter into slightly shady and highly secret deals if he thought that they were in his own interest, he was equally ready to abandon them the moment it proved convenient to do so. p. 145

It would thus appear that Vigilius had no integrity and was swayed easily by pressure from those in power. Historians justify their verdict by the circumstances of his election to the papacy and his broken promises to the Monophysites.

Vigilius's election to the papacy was certainly not innocent. A member of a Roman aristocratic family, Vigilius was an ambitious deacon and the papal nuncio in Constantinople. He had been nominated by Boniface II as his successor, but his bid for the papacy failed, due to the open hostility of the Roman clergy to his candidacy. However, he was later given another chance at the papacy when he was approached by the powerful Byzantine empress, Theodora. Theodora, like most eastern Christians, was a member of the Monophysites, a heretical organization staunchly condemned by the Church. Her plan was to establish as Pope a man who was either a Monophysite or at least sympathetic to their beliefs who would make peace with the Monophysites and restore Anthimus, the heretical bishop of Constantinople, so that the Monophysites would be no longer removed from the Church. Theodora offered Vigilius the succession to the recently deceased Pope Agapetus, on the condition that, once Pope, he would publicly support the Monophysites. According to Bridge,

Vigilius leapt at the chance of an alliance with Theodora, and agreed at once. Theodora then dispatched him to Rome with letter[s] in which she gave precise orders as to what should be done to make him Pope. p. 145

However, when he arrived in Rome, he found that a sub-deacon named Silverius had already been elected Pope. On finding that Silverius was no more disposed than his predecessors to make peace with the Monophysites, Theodora had him deposed and the next day, 29 March 537, Vigilius was made Pope.

It would appear from these actions that Vigilius was certainly ambitious. The judgment that he was guided only by what would have been in his own best interest would be justified by the fact that, once he had secured the Papacy, he refused to restore Anthimus or to make any

attempt at reconciliation with the Monophysites. The fact that these actions received the support of the vast majority of the clergy and laity of Rome, who were staunchly orthodox, would merely serve to underscore the point. However, it might also be that Vigilius was, by true conviction, orthodox and, after becoming Pope, was convinced of his own wrongdoing and sought to atone for this. At any rate, this assumption would appear to be far more in accordance with his later actions.

The Byzantine emperor, Justinian, because of his own political ambitions, was dedicated to the cause of uniting the Monophysites and the orthodox clergy of Rome. He therefore issued an edict condemning the Nestorians, another heretical organization whose beliefs were not in accordance with either the Monophysites or the orthodox Christians. He believed that if he could unite the Monophysites and the orthodox Christians in their opposition to the Nestorians, their opposition to each other might then be swayed. However, while his edict, known as the condemnation of the Three Chapters, was received with guarded approval, if not enthusiasm, by the Monophysites and the Orthodox party in the East, the reaction in Rome was quite hostile. Many leading Catholics believed that the edict was of doubtful orthodoxy, if not heretical.

Justinian was convinced that Pope Vigilius himself must be made to condemn the Three Chapters if any good was to come out of his edict. According to *The Lives of the Popes, In 544, Vigilius was reminded that his loyalty to the Emperor would involve condemnation of the Three Chapters. Vigilius refused: he was arrested and taken to Catania in Sicily to await further developments. p. 58*

Vigilius remained there a year under close guard, unwavering in his opposition to the edict. This is in direct contradiction to Bridge's assumption that Vigilius was ready to abandon any deal whenever it should lie in his own best interests to do so. Clearly, Vigilius must have held beliefs in firm opposition to the edict that he was prepared to uphold in order to withstand imperial pressure and imprisonment on these very grounds for any length of time. After the year's imprisonment, Vigilius was summoned to Constantinople. There, under increased pressure from the Emperor, his opposition to the condemnation of the Three Chapters began to waver. The events of the next few years are not clear and all that is certain during these years is that the imperial court was occupied in doing everything possible to coerce support among bishops in the West. Finally, in 548 Vigilius issued a formal judgment, condemning the Three Chapters. However, this action provoked such an outcry in the West that in 550 he withdrew it, at the same time secretly promising the Emperor to secure a condemnation of the Three Chapters at a coming council. These actions would appear to be more faithful to Bridge's picture of his character, as an ambition-driven and easily swayed man of no integrity.

However, at the council Vigilius sought a compromise, in which he condemned one of the philosophers in the Three Chapters, but not the other two. This was rejected by the council, who instead accepted the condemnation of the Three Chapters. According to *The Lives of the Popes,*

Having secured the condemnation of the Three Chapters Justinian set about suppressing all opposition: several prominent Western opponents were arrested and exiled, and Vigilius himself placed in solitary confinement on bread and water. p. 58

After a year's imprisonment, Vigilius, much weakened, issued a second Constitutum which accepted the decisions of the council. He was released, but died before he reached Rome.

From his actions during the conflict, it is clear that Vigilius was not the unprincipled man that Bridge declared him to be. Although he did eventually accept the edict, his previous actions are not those of one who would willingly sacrifice principles and beliefs for the advance of personal ambition. That Vigilius was prepared to defy the Emperor over the condemnation of the Three Chapters and was subsequently imprisoned twice is certainly not consistent with the assertion that he was prepared to abandon his beliefs the moment it proved convenient to do so. It would thus appear that Pope Vigilius, whatever his faults, was not guided only by ambition and self-interest, but was in possession of principles and beliefs that he was prepared to uphold.

Bibliography

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