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Pope Urban VIII

Pope Urban VIII Maffeo Barberini (1568-1644)

The Barberini were a powerful family, with branches in Rome and [Florence](#), which had produced several [cardinals](#) up to that point. Maffeo was born into the Florentine branch of the family in 1568. His father died when Maffeo was only three years old; his mother insisted that he be educated by the [Jesuits](#) -- first in Florence, and later in Rome at the Jesuit [Collegio Romano](#). Here he lived with his uncle, Francesco Barberini, who held the high church office of [Prothonotary Apostolic](#). In 1589 he took the degree of doctor of law from the University of Pisa.

Maffeo Barberini's rise in the church hierarchy was rapid. In 1601 he served as [papal legate](#) to the court of Henri IV, king of France; in 1604 he became [archbishop](#) of Nazareth (an office he obviously fulfilled in absentia since the Holy Land was under Moslem rule) and took up the post of papal nuncio (lit. *messenger*, the papal legate permanently accredited to a civil government) to the French king; in 1606 he was made a cardinal with the titular church of St. Peter in Montorio and later St. Onofrio; in 1608 he became [bishop](#) of Spoleto. As bishop, Barberini convened a [synod](#), completed the construction of one seminary and built two others, and served as legate of Bologna and [prefect](#) of the Segnatura di Giustizia. Upon the death of Pope Gregory XV, in 1623, Maffeo Barberini was elected Pope, taking the name of Urban VIII.

During his long papacy, Urban VIII promoted missionary work. He formed [dioceses](#) and [vicariats](#) in various missionary territories and founded a college for the training of missionaries. He also repealed the monopoly on missionary work in China and Japan given to the Jesuits in 1585, opening these countries to missionaries of all orders. In 1639 he prohibited slavery among the Indians of Brazil, Paraguay, and the West Indies.

During this period the temporal power of the papacy was in greatest danger

from the Hapsburg dynasty which ruled much of the German speaking region of Europe, the Southern Netherlands, and Spain. Spanish influence in Italy has been on the rise for a century, and the kingdom of Naples and Sicily, under Spanish rule, lay immediately to the South of the Papal State. For this reason, Urban VIII favored the anti-Hapsburg policy of the French, neglecting to support the catholic cause in Germany.

Urban VIII saw to it that the Barberini family benefited from his papacy. His brother and two nephews were made cardinals and given high church offices. Other family members were helped by the Pope in the acquisition of property and titles . He even went so far as to make war on Parma, Tuscany, Modena, and Venice over a matter of protocol involving his nephew-cardinals. Pope Urban strengthened fortifications and armaments in the papal territories. He lavishly supported artists, chief among whom was Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini, who beautified St. Peter's cathedral. Urban had the bronze supporting girders of the Roman Pantheon melted down and made into cannon and other objects. This prompted the epigram: `` What the barbarians did not do the Barberini's did."

Maffeo Barberini was an accomplished man of letters, who published several volumes of verse. Upon Galileo' s return to Florence, in 1610, Barberini came to admire Galileo' s intelligence and sharp wit. During a court dinner, in 1611, at which Galileo defended his view on floating bodies, Barberini supported Galileo against Cardinal Gonzaga. From this point, their patron-client relationship flourished until it was undone in 1633. Upon Barberini' s ascendance of the papal throne, in 1623, Galileo came to Rome and had six interviews with the new Pope. It was at these meetings that Galileo was given permission to write about the Copernican theory, as long as he treated it as a hypothesis. After the publication of Galileo' s *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief Systems of the World*, in 1632, the patronage relationship was broken. It appears that the Pope never forgave Galileo for putting the argument of God's omnipotence (the argument he himself had put to Galileo in 1623) in the mouth of Simplicio, the staunch Aristotelian whose arguments had been systematically destroyed in the previous 400-odd pages. At any rate, the Pope resisted all efforts to have Galileo pardoned.

Sources: *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.

Image: Giorgio di Santillana, *The Crime of Galileo* (University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 172.

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