



Eight of the worst popes in church history

By [Drew Kann](#), CNN

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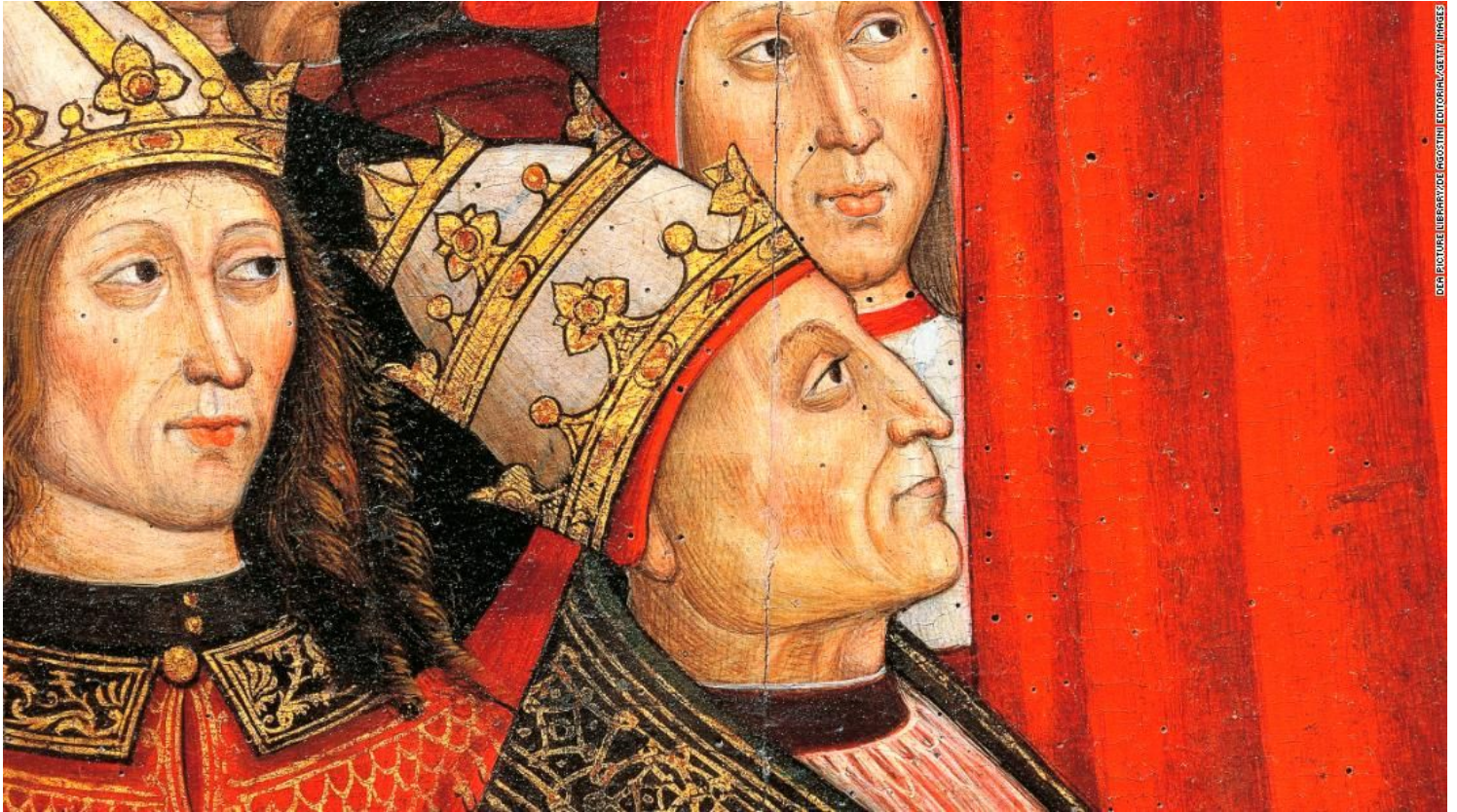
(CNN) — Billed as a reformer and outsider, Pope Francis was elected five years ago.

He took the helm as the Catholic Church wrestled with corruption and the fallout of the [child sexual abuse scandal](#). But this is hardly the first time that the church has been gripped by scandal.

Can you imagine a Pope placing the rotting corpse of his predecessor on trial? Or putting the papacy itself up for sale?

Well, history tells us that popes did all that and more at a time when they apparently played by a very different set of rules.

Here are eight popes you'll find in the history books for all the wrong reasons:



BORN AS: Rodrigo Borgia near Valencia, Spain, in 1431.

TIME IN POWER: 1492-1503.

WHAT HE DID: To this day, the Borgia name is synonymous with scandal because of this guy's rule. (How many other papal families have a [Showtime series](#) named after them?)

There was controversy from the start with Pope Alexander VI, a wealthy Spaniard who allegedly [bought the papacy by bribing his fellow electors](#).

Alexander also saw no problem appointing many of his relatives to positions of power, or [killing off rival cardinals to claim their valuable property for himself](#).

And he was apparently quite the ladies' man, fathering several children with his many mistresses.

Pope Stephen VI



BORN AS: Birth name, date and birthplace unknown.

TIME IN POWER: May 896-August 897.

WHAT HE DID: Pope Stephen VI did not have a chummy relationship with his predecessor, Pope Formosus. And that's putting it kindly.

When Stephen came to power, Formosus had already been dead for months, but having his enemy six feet under was not enough punishment for the new Pope.

He ordered the rotting corpse exhumed, [redressed in papal robes and placed on the throne to face trial](#).

It's safe to say the verdict didn't go Formosus' way, so Stephen commanded his body be dragged through the streets of Rome and dumped in the Tiber River.

Though he won the so-called cadaver trial, Stephen was strangled to death by one of his enemies barely more than a year later.

Pope Boniface VIII



BORN AS: Benedetto Caetani in Rome, circa 1235.

TIME IN POWER: 1294-1303.

WHAT HE DID: With his "my way or the highway" approach to the papacy, Pope Boniface VIII had a knack for starting fights.

Among his many enemies was the writer Dante Alighieri, whose criticism of the church led to his exile from Florence, Italy, at the hands of Boniface's cronies.

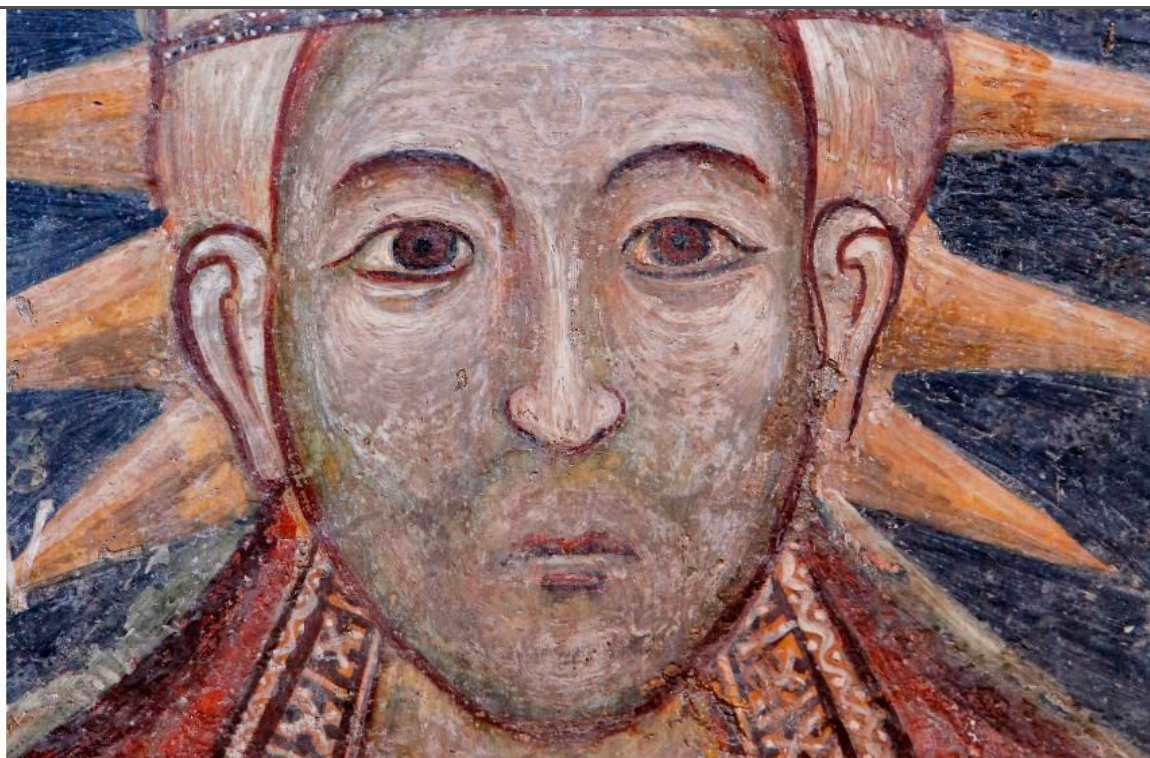
But his most heated feud was with France's powerful King Philip IV.

In 1302, Boniface issued a papal bull -- the church's term for an official proclamation -- which placed Europe's kings and their armies under his supreme command.

Many rulers may have called "bull" on this, especially Philip, who ordered Boniface's capture after he caught wind of the Pope's plans to excommunicate him.

Boniface died soon after, but not before earning himself a permanent spot in the eighth circle of Hell in Dante's "Inferno."

Pope Urban VI



BORN AS: Bartolomeo Prignano in Naples, Italy, circa 1318.

TIME IN POWER: 1378-1389.

WHAT HE DID: When your tenure tears the church in two, consider your spot on the "not a great pope" list secured.

Pope Urban VI's election in 1378 [triggered the Western Schism](#), also known as the time when there were two, and later, three, competing popes claiming the title of church leader à la "Game of Thrones." Urban also had no problem using violence to dispatch his enemies.

He called for the brutal killings of cardinals who plotted against him, and legend has it he even griped that [their screams weren't loud enough](#).

Pope Leo X



BORN AS: Giovanni de' Medici in Florence, Italy, in 1475.

TIME IN POWER: 1513-1521.

WHAT HE DID: A member of Italy's powerful Medici family, Pope Leo X had a taste for the finer things in life.

He funded some of the Renaissance's most famous artwork, but his big spending [drove the church's finances deep into the red](#).

To help balance the books, he relied heavily on the sale of indulgences -- which is forking over money to the church to buy forgiveness for sins or, say, to get a dead relative out of Purgatory.

You might remember from history class that this pay-for-penance scheme angered many, including Martin Luther, whose "95 Theses" sparked the Protestant Reformation and tore apart the Catholic Church.

Pope John XII

BORN AS: Ottaviano in Rome, circa 937.

TIME IN POWER: 955-964.

WHAT HE DID: He was only about 18 when he became Pope, and history claims that John XII ran the church in a way you'd expect from a hormonal teenager with enormous power.

From most accounts, it sounds like the papal palace under John XII was part-raucous frat party, [part-seedy brothel](#).

Whichever version you believe, John XII was definitely not celibate, and legend has it he died of a stroke doing what he loved ... with another man's wife.

Pope Benedict IX

BORN AS: Theophylactus in Rome, circa 1012.

TIME IN POWER: 1032-1044; April-May 1045; 1047-1048

WHAT HE DID: A "demon from hell" and "so vile, so foul, so execrable that I shudder to think of it" are just a few of the kind words future saints and other popes have used to describe Pope Benedict IX.

This Pope held the position [three different times](#), and was kind of like a really bad cold that the church couldn't get rid of.

His first spell as Pope ended with him fleeing Rome after a citizens' rebellion erupted over his violent behavior.

He then came back into power for a second stint but sold the papacy to his godfather, who became Pope Gregory VI.

But Benedict was still not finished. He returned to Rome years later, reclaimed the throne and then lost it again after German armies finally chased him out of Rome for good.

Pope Sergius III

BORN AS: Sergius in Rome. Birth date is unknown.

TIME IN POWER: 904-911.

WHAT HE DID: As a friend of Pope Stephen VI of "cadaver trial" fame, it should come as little surprise that Sergius III was also not a great Pope.

Sergius came to power at a time when several players laid claim to the title, and after declaring a number of his rivals anti-popes, he had at [least one of them killed](#).

He's also said by some to be the father of Pope John XI, the product of Sergius' relationship with a Roman socialite named Marozia.



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