

***Publishing for the Popes:  
The Roman Curia and the Use of Printing (1527–1555)***

Paolo Sachet  
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In *Publishing for the Popes*, Paolo Sachet describes the Roman Curia's attitude towards printing in the period that falls between the early Reformation and the major Catholic shift towards censorship that occurred in the second half of the sixteenth century. During this period, and against conventional wisdom, the Church did indeed engage in a series of editorial programmes, but focussed mostly on the publication of learned texts, particularly from the Vatican Library. The driving force behind these projects was Cardinal Marcello Cervini (1501–55), who thus plays the main role in the Author's analysis.

The volume is divided into eight chapters: the first and last two provide the reader with 'Introduction,' 'Prelude,' 'Epilogue' and 'Conclusions,' while the main body, comprising four chapters, rotates almost entirely around Cardinal Marcello Cervini's printing enterprises (1539–55): (3) 'Portrait of a *Cardinale Editore*'; (4) 'Cervini's Greek Press'; (5) 'Cervini's Latin Press'; (6) 'Cervini's Editorial Activity after 1544.' Finally, the book contains two useful documentary appendices: (A) 'The Greek Partnership Accounts,' and (B) 'Short-title Catalogue of Books Sponsored by Cervini.' In the 'Introduction' (1–10) the Author lays out the aim of the book:

to provide the first comprehensive insight into the complex relationship between an increasingly powerful governmental institution, the mid-sixteenth-century papacy, and a relatively new medium of communication, printing by means of moveable type. In particular, [...] how this nexus took shape at the very heart of the Catholic Church, in Rome, where several attempts were made by the Curia to publish books, often in connection with other Italian printing centres, such as Venice, Florence and Bologna (1).

In short, the notion that, in order to contrast the Reformation, the Roman Curia limited its action to book censorship was outdated and had to be rectified with a comprehensive study of Catholic printing initiatives. Further, the Author explains his decision to focus on Rome as a case study to analyse the whole Catholic response to Reformed propaganda in light of the unique layout of power structures inside the Catholic world, with Rome effectively acting as the uncontested leader, at least with

regards to institutional policies and strategies (4–5). In the ‘Prelude’ (11–39) the Author then assesses the early experiments and the cultural and political preconditions that brought Cervini to envisage a deeper Catholic engagement with the printing medium. Further, he analyses in particular the decade following the Sack of Rome of 1527, that is, the period between one of the most traumatic events in early-modern Catholic history, and Cervini’s early experiments with the press in 1539. Among these, the Author identifies and combines three points in particular: i) the experience of Gian Matteo Giberti (1495–1543), bishop of Verona from 1524 to his death, who oversaw an important forerunning reformation project in his diocese and who, crucially, gave great relevance to learned printing as a means to achieve his reforming goals; ii) the mostly unheeded pleas by the few German Catholic scholars (Johannes Cochlaeus and the bishop of Vienna, Johann Fabri, in particular), and their insistent requests that Rome invested in supporting the printed production of Catholic controversy in its fight against Reformers, often highlighting the hardships that Catholic authors in Germany had to endure to get their works published and distributed; iii) the early steps in the development of the figure of the *stampatore camerale*, i.e. the official printer of the Roman Apostolic Chamber, a position that took years to become formally recognised, touching upon figures such as the printer Francesco Minizio Calvo and the rising star Antonio Blado. While discussing the much-debated topic of the creation of this role within the complex bureaucratic machine of Catholic Church, the Author takes the opportunity to remind the reader to resist the temptation to generalise and extrapolate, projecting later notions retrospectively onto past events (28–29), as too many reputed scholars have done with regards to the *stampatore camerale*. The element that connects these three apparently distant realities is the shared commitment to develop printing strategies aimed at reassessing the papal primacy and safeguarding Catholicism against the Reformation.

After the ‘Prelude’, the Author begins weaving together the many threads that make Cardinal Cervini one of the most complex and fascinating figures of the Roman Counter-Reformation: in the central part of the volume, ‘Portrait of a *Cardinale Editore*’ (chapter 3, 43–65) tackles Marcello Cervini’s career exploits up to his management of the first phase of the Council of Trent and eventually his exceedingly brief papacy, but focusses particularly on his scholarly formation, in Siena and Rome, and his solid ties with Catholic humanists, contextualising some of the motives behind Cervini’s subsequent cultural activities. Indeed, as the Author declares,

we are now more aware of him as an astute politician, pious bishop and efficient inquisitor, as well as an erudite patron, generous man of letters and passionate bibliophile. How these various aspects of his activity and personality come together remains an open question; Cervini’s attitude towards printing can offer a revealing point of convergence.’ (47)

In ‘Cervini’s Greek Press’ (chapter 4, 66–90), the Author addresses Cervini’s first experiment in his printing patronage, a partnership between Antonio Blado, Benedetto Giunta, Stefano Nicolini da Sabbio and Nikolaos Sophianos and known as the

‘stamperia dei greci’ (69). The Greek press was active in Rome for little over three years, between late 1540 and late 1543, and issued only two learned commentaries, Eustathius on Homer and Theophylact on the Gospels, and one pamphlet (a short treatise by Sophianos on the astrolabe) before it fell apart due to disagreements between the partners as well as poor sale figures. This chapter in particular is closely linked to, and meticulously based on, Appendix A, ‘The Greek Partnership Accounts’ (215–224), the first full transcription of this crucial document, currently held in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Cervini*, vol. 51 (fols. 128bis–136bis). These accounts are a most valuable document for the history of booktrade, since they provide details on print-runs, expenses, sales and individual roles within the partnership. And the Author has put them to excellent use, leading to a much-improved contextualisation of the dynamics of the Greek press, and of the reasons of its eventual demise.

Months after launching the Greek press, in 1541 Cervini engaged in a second, distinct project, and the subject of chapter 5, ‘Cervini’s Latin Press’ (91–133). While the Greek press inevitably required individuals with advanced knowledge of Greek, leading to an enlarged partnership, this latter endeavour was entrusted to Francesco Priscianese, a Florentine teacher and a skilled Latinist, capable of handling the publication of Latin Christian literature that Cervini wished to see in print. It succeeded in publishing nine editions: Nicholas I’s *Epistolae*, Arnobius’s *Disputationum adversus gentes*, Innocent III’s *Decretalium*, Bessarion’s *Orationes*, Oribasius’s *De aquis*, the *Aegidianae constitutiones*, Ludovico Sensi’s *Conciones quinque* and two pamphlets by Henry VIII: *Assertio septem sacramentorum* and *Literarum ad quandam epistolam Martini Lutherum exemplum*. The latter two editions, both issued in 1543, are particularly interesting and only apparently an odd choice, since they clearly represent Cervini’s intention to use Henry VIII’s early writings against Luther as a subtle political weapon. Yet, despite a potentially larger audience for learned Latin editions – compared to the Greek ones, that is – this venture too lasted just over three years, and folded in 1544.

‘Cervini’s Editorial Activity after 1544’ (chapter 6, 134–84), finally, describes a parallel and certainly more enduring approach adopted by Cervini in his pursuit to contrast the diffusion of Protestantism. This second path, that effectively predates the foundation of the Greek and Roman presses and indeed survived even beyond Cervini’s own death in 1555, is defined by a flexible use of different printers. In this case the promotion of learned editions, either direct or indirect, relied on a variety of editors and printers, mostly in Rome and Venice, but also in Bologna, Florence and, in Europe, in Cologne, Basel and Paris. The publications described in this chapter are not all openly linked to Cervini’s patronage; however, by highlighting the vast web of his connections within both the Church and the scholarly communities, and, most importantly, thanks to a meticulous knowledge and use of his epistolary, the Author often manages to argue convincingly in favour of Cervini’s influence. ‘Appendix B’ (225–40) conveniently gathers all these editions in one place, listing them by city and by printer, including a number of publications that may be considered part of Cervini’s ‘publishing heritage’ after his death. Further, it offers a very useful list of projected

editions that never saw the light but, at one point or another, were considered for publication (236–40).

The ‘Epilogue’ (chapter 7, 185–206) somehow mirrors the ‘Prelude,’ in that it discusses some developments, late in Cervini’s life, more or less directly inspired by Cervini’s publishing endeavours: among others, the institutional recognition of a permanent *stampatore camerale*; the press established in Rome by Olaus Magnus, the last Catholic archbishop of Uppsala in exile; and the relevance given to printing by the newly-founded Society of Jesus. Finally, in the ‘Conclusion’ (chapter 8, 207–12), the Author wraps up the results of his analysis, highlighting, in particular, i) the number of scholars and members of the clergy who gravitated directly around the papal court and were also regularly involved in printing projects (208); ii) several elements of continuity in the Catholic effort to stand up against the Reformation by means of publishing projects (208–09); iii) that these editorial programmes were mostly limited to Greek and Latin Christian authors, probably in an attempt to rid themselves of ‘the “pagan” dimension of the Italian Renaissance’ (210) and, much less predictably, that polemical works were almost completely absent; iv) that these editions were most likely intended to target the learned secular and regular Catholic clergy, in an effort to provide them with the tools to prevent the spread of Protestantism in the lands that remained Catholic – taking for granted, that is, that most of Germany and Northern Europe were already *de facto* a lost cause (210).

One might not necessarily agree with the statement that ‘[t]his book was undertaken in response to the lack of scholarly interest in the sixteenth-century Catholic Church’s use of printing as a means of communication in the wake of the Reformation’ (207), since the lack of scholarly interest in the subject is, to say the least, debatable. Not only is there interest: there are also a few studies on the subject (as, indeed, the volume’s extensive and punctual bibliography shows), though certainly not as many as a subject of this importance would deserve. The Author’s claim is however true with regards to English-speaking scholarship (a doubt should probably be raised, at this point, on the quality of scholarship produced by people who work professionally on this subject and cannot read neither Italian nor Latin, something that only a few decades ago would have been unthinkable). Further, the magnitude of the scope might have hindered earlier attempts to produce an overview of this kind, yet the Author has abundantly succeeded in this.

In conclusion, the Author has delivered an authoritative overview and an excellent tool to explore the Roman Curia’s attitudes towards printing in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Like all good scholarship, this book leaves the reader with as many questions as answers: it is clear that the Catholic response to the overwhelming assault of Reformed propaganda was almost entirely defensive, based on censorship and on small-scale publication programmes of learned Christian texts, and that these approaches could only have a limited impact against the Protestant storm. From the standpoint of propaganda, the Catholic Church remained ultimately defenceless against the biting and relentless attacks of Protestant polemicists. Indeed, the

Reformation enjoyed a powerful intellectual momentum, and its lack of a rigid hierarchical system had all the advantages of guerrilla insurgency against a regular army in what quite evidently was an instance of asymmetrical cultural warfare. Still, the question remains: why was the Catholic Church so devastatingly slow and ineffective in understanding the dangers, but also the potential, of printed propaganda? One can only hope that the Author will tackle this question in a future study.