

Papal indulgence

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [April 30, 2014](#) issue



GODFATHER: Jeremy Irons plays the ruthless and ambitious Rodrigo Borgia, who became Pope Alexander VI in 1492. © 2013 SHOWTIME. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Alexander VI was the worst of the Borgia popes, against whom the Reformation was right to protest. He's the subject of the Showtime series *The Borgias*. There were three popes from the Borgia family from the 15th to the 17th centuries, and, of the three, Alexander VI was the most infamous: he was accused of simony, lechery, and adultery—which gives the English actor Jeremy Irons some material to work with. If you ever find yourself wondering how Martin Luther or John Calvin could imagine the pope as the Antichrist, give this series a gander.

Steven Spielberg was the one who suggested that Neil Jordan turn his two-hour biopic into a cable series. He did, brilliantly, and the show's cancellation after three seasons left fans clamoring for more. Among cable TV dramas, *The Borgias* is much like *The Tudors* (neither one is big on historical accuracy) and *Game of Thrones* (which, though not based on real events, also has lots of naked people and violent deaths).

*The Borgias* compels us with the shock that this man—with a common-law wife, three grown children, a mistress, and backup mistresses whose bastard children can hold out against incest for only so long—is actually the pope at a time when the papacy was more powerful than it ever was or would be. The bishop of Rome crowned kings, and he was one, fighting for and against them in a dazzling variety of tawdry military alliances. All the Christian world had to pay homage to him—in this case, in devotion and gold. He had to pay the same to other cardinals to buy his election—he had abbeys and bishoprics to offer them. He was more like the godfather than the holy father.

“Simony!” Cardinal Orsini shouts at the first gathering of cardinals after the pope’s enthronement. He is poisoned soon after by the pope’s son Cesare—himself a bishop and then a cardinal, who wishes he were a warrior and swears he will be now that his father needs protection. “We draw the line at murder,” the pope intones, with no effect, and not for the last time.

Alexander’s conscience does buckle occasionally—just not as often as his desire for the sultry voice on the other side of the confessional screen. He swills from his flask as he discusses whether political threats are more likely to come from France or Spain. He is never surprised at the depth of wickedness of which others are capable—because he’s capable of going quite deep in that direction himself. He is human and believable.

The pope welcomes the Jews expelled from his native Spain. When an adviser asks, “Did the Jews not kill our Lord?” the pope responds, “I thought our Lord was killed by Romans”—and he has his contemporaries in mind. He receives a Muslim sultan who so enjoys the papal hospitality that he seeks to become Christian. However, rivals in Constantinople have offered a sufficient price for his head that it’s more convenient for the pope to have him killed.

My favorite scene comes toward the end of season one. King Charles VIII of France (Michel Muller) enters Rome at the head of 25,000 troops and a fearsome new weapon for which there is no Italian word: cannons. He plans to depose the Borgia pope, but when he encounters Alexander VI he finds the pope in a simple friar’s habit, at prayer, prostrate in St. Peter’s. The king of France and his holiness discuss the roles that “we did not choose—they were chosen for us.” The pope keeps his throne and King Charles marches on to Naples, convinced that was his destination all along. For a moment a pope is holy and a king is noble and merciful. But only for

a moment.

The show has many missed opportunities to make something of holiness as well as of sin. Every age, even the age of the Borgias, has saints, monks, mystics, nuns, and scholars who can teach us something of God's holiness. Even though Catherine of Genoa lived in Italy and made a stir with her acts of holiness and her visions, she merits no mention in the show.

Heirs of the Reformation think God raised up the Reformers to topple such popes as these. The only hint of reform here is a maniacal Savonarola. The one cardinal who purports to care about restoring the holiness of the church—a Cardinal della Rovere (played with understated dignity by Colm Feore)—can imagine no other way to do that than by the force of French arms or the poisoned chalice.

The show can portray power, rivalry, intrigue, jealousy, murder—in short, sin. But to portray holiness—the holiness that actually moves the sun and the stars? That would be a cinematographic feat indeed.