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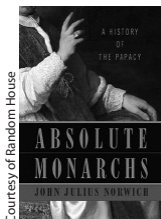
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# Review Essay

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## The Vatican—Two Accounts

DAVID REESE

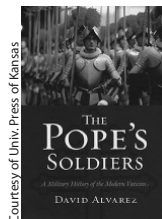


*Absolute Monarchs: A History of the Papacy*  
by John Julius Norwich

New York: Random House,  
2011

528 pages

\$30.00



*The Pope's Soldiers: A Military History of the Modern Vatican*  
by David Alvarez

Lawrence: University Press  
of Kansas, 2011

429 pages

\$34.95

It is not theology, it is history—make no mistake about it. John Norwich and David Alvarez have penned two studies that offer a unique glimpse into a historically closed system. For those willing to take the alley between the larger buildings of military history and church history, they will find plenty of opportunities to look up and see a precarious clothesline between the two, bedecked with the laundry of the Vatican as a temporal state power and its ecclesial authority that reaches beyond time.

John Norwich is a renowned British historian who protests, “I am no scholar and my books are not works of scholarship.” Instead, he says, they are intended for the average intelligent reader. If, by scholarship, he means lack of primary sources, then his personal characterization is accurate. On the other hand, if he suggests that the work does not reflect the mark of knowledge that “exhibits accuracy, critical ability, and thoroughness,” then he is seriously underselling himself.

Norwich researches and writes broadly within the history field, with such books as *A History of Venice* and *The Architecture of Southern England*. Perhaps it is because of his secondary skills as a travel writer that Norwich’s account of the papacy is an enjoyable and absorbing read. The author does more than just offer chronological chapters on each pope. He takes the reader on a journey through emblematic events that shape both the person and institution at the center of Roman Catholicism.

He begins, naturally enough, with the apostle Peter, whom Jesus characterized in the Gospel of Matthew as the rock on which he would build his church. Norwich’s first chapter addresses the primacy of Peter as the first “pope” and the associated authority that came with apostolic succession. He then moves easily through chunks of time from as little as two years to as much as five hundred years to weave the papal story that is as much mystery writing as it is history, sprinkled with a dash of legend. In every instance, Norwich captures

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the intrigue, political nuances, and alliances associated with each pope's ascendancy or decline of the Bishop of Rome and Vicar of Christ.

Norwich does not shy away from the controversial popes of the early centuries, including the possibility of a female pope (alternately known as Pope Joan or Agnes) in the first century, and Pope John XII who was the exemplar of debauchery. He does a superb job of illuminating the personalities involved in the Great Schism between the Eastern and Western churches, the Renaissance, and the Counter-Reformation. In every chapter, the reader encounters word pictures that seem to place him in the presence of those personalities: "Deeply pious, dry as dust, and crippled by gout, Calixtus devoted his pontificate to two consuming ambitions . . . ."

As a rule, Norwich seems to keep his personal opinions in check, or at least veiled. The exception is in his treatment of the current Pope Benedict XVI, but even then he seems to deal with him evenhandedly from the perspective of a historian and observer of human behavior. Some reviewers have chided Norwich for his selective emphasis on the Roman Catholic Church as the sole proprietor of the Christian tradition, to the exclusion of the Eastern Orthodox expression, citing the book's opening paragraph as being too myopic. "What cannot be denied," Norwich writes there, "is that the Roman Catholic Church, of which he [the pope] is head, is as old as Christianity itself; all other Christian religions—and there are more than 22,000 of them—are offshoots or deviants from it." Considering that Norwich describes himself in his introduction as an "agnostic Protestant" with "no ax to grind," the characterization seems one sided. Perhaps the reviewers thought the title should have been clearer, though—maybe "A History of the Western Papacy" might have satisfied them.

*The Pope's Soldiers* is, however, adequately titled. David Alvarez, a professor in the Department of Politics at St. Mary's College of California, has trod this path to the Vatican before. His previous works include *Spies in the Vatican: Espionage and Intrigue from Napoleon to the Holocaust* and *Nothing Sacred: Nazi Espionage against the Vatican, 1933-1945*.

The flyleaf captures Alvarez's interest in this subject succinctly: "Most students of history assume that the age of the 'warlord popes' ended with the Renaissance, but, long after the victory to Catholic powers at the battle of Lepanto in 1571, the papacy continued to entangle itself in martial affairs . . . and during the Second World War, mobilized more than 2,000 of its own troops to defend the pope." Alvarez corrects that misjudgment of historians, providing ample evidence of a papal army that is actively engaged in the defense of the sovereign Vatican and its head of state against all manner of intrusion.

In *The Pope's Soldiers*, the author relies extensively on Italian histories and archival documents of the Vatican to provide a detailed and nuanced look inside the historical role of the Pontifical Swiss Guard, the Vatican Gendarmeria, and the Noble Guard, with a slight nod to the Pontifical Navy that existed until 1878. It is abundantly clear that Alvarez has dug deeply for his research—much to the delight of serious students of history. The level of detail in each chapter is amazing, often down to the exact minute of the day at which an event occurred.

For the casual armchair historian, however, this deference to minutiae may prove distracting to the larger narrative.

*The Pope's Soldiers* is devoid of explicit analysis, favoring instead to simply recount the story of change and challenge to both the foot soldiers and the military leaders of the papal army. Alvarez sticks strictly to historical narrative, steering clear of any hint of theological implications. The book assumes the reader is familiar with the beginnings of the papal army, the establishment of the papal states, and the Lateran Agreements that challenged the temporal power of the pope. The papacy is treated first as a state, and only secondarily as a religious authority. This reflects the reality of the historical propensity of some—Napoleon, Mussolini, and Hitler—to place the Vatican under their thumb. The astute reader will easily draw lessons from Alvarez's narrative that illustrate foundational principles of leadership, organizational cultures and the complexity of international relations.

Alvarez spends his final chapter, "Guardian Angels," making the short jaunt from the close of the Second World War to the present, offering the briefest of highlights on the impact of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union before addressing potential critics of the contemporary papal army. "Those who dismiss the need for papal armed units," he writes, "either by minimizing the threat to the Holy Father and the Vatican or by trusting in the protection of divine providence, might do well to consider the impact not just on the Catholic Church but on the relations between people and between states of a politically or religiously motivated assassination of the pope or the devastating terrorist attack on Saint Peter's or the Vatican."

Though these books are not likely candidates for a prominent place on most shelves, those readers who have eclectic tastes in history or who are simply intrigued by the position of the Vatican in the constellation of sovereign states will find both Norwich and Alvarez a fascinating study. The concluding chapters of both books offer grist for critical thought on the role of religion in diplomacy and public affairs, the place of the pope in addressing international issues, and some limited examination of the culture of closed systems. After the broad, sweeping tours of battlefields normally associated with military history, an excursion down this alley is a welcome side trip that provides a nugget of surprise for those travelers willing to go off the beaten path.