

FRANCISCAN CONNECTIONS

by Michael Giffin

The Pope's Daughter: The Extraordinary Life of Felice della Rovere,
by Caroline P. Murphy;
Faber & Faber, 2006, \$26.95.

THIS ELEGANT and accessible book knows its limits, never strays beyond its ken, or risks becoming hostage to fortune. It's about an important but little-known subject. Its use of source material is astute and comprehensive, and where there's no source material its assumptions are measured, as the author, Caroline Murphy, introduces her readers to historical characters who lived in Italy during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Their world was dominated by the politics of patronage, the imperatives of agrarian and mercantile capitalism, and a focus on the interconnected web of mutual responsibility between rulers and ruled.

Felice della Rovere was born around 1493, the illegitimate daughter of Giuliano della Rovere, the cardinal who became Julius II. The della Rovere family rose from obscurity to prominence in the fifteenth century. They were contemporary with the Borgia and the Medici. They had, and would maintain, strong links with the Franciscan Order. Giuliano was the nephew of a cardinal, Francesco della Rovere, a friar who became Sixtus IV. As pope, Julius II is chiefly remembered for rebuilding the papal kingdom and making Rome a mecca for artists and art lovers. He brought Michelangelo and Raphael to the Vatican. During his reign, the cultural capital of the Renaissance moved from Florence to Rome.

It wasn't unusual for cardinals to have illegitimate children. It was less usual for a cardinal who became the pope to recognise his daughter the way Julius recognised Felice. He did as much as he could do to acknowledge her status and launch her in the world. He provided her with a dowry, and arranged two expedient marriages, but even then he was circumspect and operated within the bounds of social convention.

Little is known about the first marriage, which was apparently brief and unsuccessful, but in a world where females were vulnerable it blessed the young Felice with the persona of a widow, and Murphy argues that she wouldn't have wanted to lose the social protection that such a persona gave her. The second marriage was different. For the sake of propriety, Julius studiously avoided the wedding, but the world still knew the pope's daughter was getting married. During this second marriage, coincident with Felice's

adulthood, Julius used her as a papal ambassador when it suited him to do so, and she even negotiated peace with the Queen of France.

All this allowed Felice to become a wealthy and powerful woman in a man's world, where everything was possible, contingent upon networks of personal loyalty, but subject to sudden change and reversal. It's Murphy's skill to show us how Felice balanced masculine sense with feminine sensibility when confronting relentless threats on many fronts. If it's unwise for us to be overly romantic about this medieval or renaissance environment, since most of us wouldn't have survived its pervasive vulnerabilities and brutalities, immense respect is due to women like Felice who did.

FELICE'S MOTHER was Lucrezia Normanni, a young woman who could trace her lineage back to the Norman invasion of Italy in the eleventh century, and whose forebears included Jacopa dei Settesoli, an ardent supporter of Francis of Assisi. (Francis so admired Jacopa he made her an honorary friar.) The relationship between Lucrezia and Giuliano was probably brief, and, for whatever reason they came together, the fact that Felice was not placed in a convent or foundling hospital is telling. The Normanni still had a good name, even if they had lost their prestige and power by the time Felice was born, and, most importantly, Giuliano had acknowledged paternity.

Lucrezia married Bernardino de Cupis, a major-domo who ran both the life and the household of another cardinal, Girolamo della Rovere, a Franciscan cousin of Giuliano, and their marriage allowed Felice to remain within her father's orbit. It's significant that throughout her life Felice remained close to her mother and stepfather, and their children, while knowing her natural father was first cardinal and then pope.

Felice's second husband was Gian Giordano Orsini, a man twenty years her senior, recently widowed, leader of one of Rome's two most powerful families, the other being the Colonna. The Orsini were old Roman aristocracy. While many of Rome's new elite were obliged to invent their roots, the Orsini had no need of such devices. Everyone knew their baronial roots could be traced back as far as the twelfth century, giving them a 500-year history, on par with the Neapolitan kings, longer than that of the d'Este or Gonzaga or Sforza.

Traditionally, the Orsini were in conflict with the Colonna, and their feudal disputes threatened Julius's plans to stabilise the ecclesiastical economy and create a magnificent new Rome. His solution was to bind both the Orsini and the Colonna to him with matrimonial ties. He once considered marrying Felice to the head of the Colonna, Marcantonio. Instead, he offered

Marcantonio his twenty-one-year-old niece Lucrezia, daughter of his sister Luchina. At the same time, he arranged for Felice to marry the head of the Orsini, Gian Giordano, whose first wife, Maria, had given birth to three children before she died: two daughters, Francesca and Carlotta, and one son, Napoleone. As part of the marriage negotiations, however, any male children of Felice's would displace Napoleone as future leader of the Orsini. In a world dominated by male egos, this arrangement would have unfortunate consequences in the future. Felice bore Gian Giordano four children: two daughters, Julia and Clarice, and two sons, Francesco and Girolamo. After her husband's death, Felice became both patron and governor of the Orsini clan until her sons came of age. There was much resentment, naturally, among those family members whose primary loyalties were to Gian Giordano's first marriage. Felice had to keep her wits about her.

THIS MARVELLOUS BIOGRAPHY weaves many strands together in six sections, each made up of several short chapters: Section I, "The Cardinal's Daughter", skilfully recovers, in the absence of much primary data, the story of Felice's conception and childhood, up until her first marriage; Section II, "The Pope's Daughter", tells the riveting public and private but always political story of what it was like being the illegitimate daughter of the pope, up until her wedding to Gian Giordano; Section III, "Felix of the Oak and the Bear" (Felice's masculine signature in Latin, Felix Ruveris Ursinis, combined her maiden and married surnames), which describes Felice's ambassadorial role on behalf of the Vatican and her entrepreneurial role as an Orsini wife; Section IV, "Patrona et Gubernatrix", describes Felice's endless public and private negotiations, as Gian Giordano's widow, as she struggled to keep a vast domestic economy afloat, and keep resentful relations from trying to wrest control from her.

Section V, "Dispossessed and Repossessed", tells the spellbinding story of the Sack of Rome, how Felice and her children were trapped and held hostage, how they escaped, how they were dispossessed of their estates as a result, how she struggled to have these

estates returned to her, and how she restored their domestic economies, all against a backdrop of increasing sibling rivalry and fratricide (Napoleone virtually declared war on Felice's branch of the Orsini, and Girolamo eventually killed Napoleone in combat). Section VI, "The Most Loving Mother in the World", describes how Felice handed control of the Orsini estates to Girolamo, when he came of age, which must have been difficult to do, since his managerial abilities were far inferior to hers.

Felice died in 1536, and, without her protection and guidance, the fortunes of her children withered. As Murphy suggests, though, when assessing her legacy: "During her tumultuous life, Felice della Rovere certainly did all she could for her family. Yet she could not control a future in which she could play no part." In spite of this, she has as much to teach us as any public figure born on the right side of the blanket, about self-belief, about standing one's ground, about knowing when and when not to compromise, and about the value of decorum.

The principal off-stage forces within this Italian orbit, occasionally on-stage, are France, the Holy Roman Empire, Spain, and the intermittent Muslim threat. Henrician England doesn't rate a mention and perhaps it shouldn't. I couldn't help but notice, though, that Felice was the exact contemporary of Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536), Henry VIII's relatively overlooked and greatly underestimated first wife, who occupied the English political stage in ways that his other five wives never did, as Princess of Wales, then Queen of England, then Dowager, for thirty-five years. Although one was illegitimate and the other legitimate, Felice's story illuminates Catherine's in many ways, up to and including their brief first marriages, perpetual vulnerability, obvious political nous, religious piety (both were Third Order Franciscans), integrity and perseverance, and the way they negotiated social and economic power to further their families' interests rather than their own.

It doesn't matter whether we regard these women as belonging to the late Middle Ages or the Renaissance. Good history about lives such as theirs is always welcome. The more we know about their world, the better we'll understand our own.