Paparo, Iohannes

by Aidan Breen

Paparo, Iohannes (d. 1154/6), a member of the Papareschi, an aristocratic ecclesiastical Roman family, was a cardinal and papal legate. He is listed as a sub-deacon in a papal document dated 22 April 1138; raised to the diaconate by Pope Celestine II in about December 1143, he was appointed to the church of S. Adriano. He spent part of his career up to 1148 on curial affairs in Verdun and Reims. He promoted the case of Ralph, count of Vermandois, who had been excommunicated by Innocent II, and had him restored to communion in 1145. It appears that he had considerable influence with the papal curia and was involved in negotiations between Pope Eugenius III and Louis VII of France on various issues. He also played a part in the preaching of the second crusade.

In 1150 Paparo was appointed cardinal legate on a papal mission organised for the purpose of reforming the Irish church. It was charged with the creation of four archiepiscopal sees: Armagh, Dublin, Cashel and Tuam, which were to be granted pallia, the insignia of papal authorisation. King Stephen refused the legation permission to pass through England, so it returned to Rome to complain to Pope Eugenius. The pope decided to raise Paparo to the status of cardinal-priest so that he would have a more appropriate rank for continuing with the legation to Ireland. According to an account in John of Salisbury's 'Historia pontificalis' (c. 36), Paparo vehemently refused promotion – a stance that must have been almost unique in papal history. Eugenius then severed relations with him, ordering him to leave the diaconate. Paparo was so enraged that he threatened to use his political connections to have the pope dethroned. The cardinals, however, 'persuaded him to beg for pardon, ask for ordination as priest, and profess all humility, pointing out that it was not seemly for a deacon to bless archbishops, and that the lord pope would not give the Irish legation to anyone who was not a priest'.

Paparo finally submitted to ordination on 31 March 1151. He again undertook the legation to Ireland, sailing directly from France to Tynemouth. David, king of Scots, came down to meet him at Carlisle, sending his chancellor in advance to meet the legation at Hexham, where Paparo was well received. It may have been at this meeting that Paparo promised to send the pallium for St Andrew's. He was accompanied by the Cistercian bishop Christian Ua Conairche (qv), who had been appointed by Pope Eugenius, his former confrère at Clairvaux, to continue as permanent legate after Paparo's departure; Christian was later to sign his name to the text of the synod as 'bishop of Lismore and legate of the pope in Ireland'.

The synod at which the four pallia were to be presented met at Kells in the beginning of March 1152. According to the annals, it was a plenary synod, attended by 'twenty-two bishops, five bishops-elect, and many abbots and priors' (Keating, 'History of
Ireland’). The canons of the synod condemned simony and usury, legislated on the perennial question of irregular marriages, and commanded the payment of tithes. The final, solemn session was held appropriately at the Cistercian abbey of Mellifont on Palm Sunday (23 March). The following day the papal legates returned home through Scotland, where they spent Easter; they were invited by King Stephen to spend some time with him in England as he wished to make amends for former injuries. The main result of the Kells–Mellifont synod was that the Irish church was effectively independent of Canterbury and directly subject to Rome.

Paparo’s subsequent legation to France earned him a good reputation with Bernard of Clairvaux. He died in either 1154 or 1156. His death was greeted with some glee by the Winchester Annals (1156): ‘This year died the Cardinal John. When he was dead, sailors heard a voice under Mount Etna saying “Stoke up the fire!”’ It would appear that his efforts in securing the independence of the Irish and Scottish churches from Canterbury had not increased his popularity with English chroniclers. The Kells–Mellifont synod was the most important reforming synod in the pre-Norman period; the diocesan boundaries which it established remained largely intact for centuries. The synod’s success was in no small measure due to Paparo’s contribution.