Keepers of the Keys of Heaven: A History of the Papacy

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**Main content**

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KEEPERS OF THE KEYS OF HEAVEN: A HISTORY OF THE PAPACY  
by Roger Collins  
Basic Books, 566 pages, $35

At the beginning of his preface, Roger Collins, a medievalist and Honorary Fellow of Edinburgh University, admits that a one-volume history of the papacy is "probably far too ambitious an undertaking." Collins is right, and, despite its virtues, Keepers of the Keys proves the point. The book is instructive in its rendering of the complexities and chaos of the medieval papacy, where Collins is playing on his home pitch; but when we get to the past two hundred years or so, both the narrative and the judgments become uneven. The necessary brevity imposed by the one-volume format (and, perhaps, an uncritical deference to the Whig theory of modern history) yield a treatment of the papacy from the French Revolution to the present in which two of Rome's greatest accomplishments--securing the Church's independence against the assaults of the modern state and preserving the deposit of faith while developing Catholic social doctrine as a comprehensive vision of human goods-go unnoticed and unremarked.

Collins' sketches of...

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