

The Pope's Daughter by Caroline P. Dunphy.
Faber and Faber 2004.

Pope Julius II is immortalized as the Pontiff who commissioned Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel but with Caroline Dunphy's book he should also be remembered as the father of one of the most extraordinary and dynamic women of Renaissance Italy.

The Pope's Daughter tells the story of Felice della Rovere from birth to death, and a truly remarkable story it is too; daughter of a scion of an illustrious family conceived while her father was a Cardinal, Felice grew up in a step-family that was deeply involved in Vatican affairs and reached adulthood with a unique understanding, for a woman, of the way things worked in Rome at the time.

Refusing attempts to marry her off she eventually became the wife of Gian Giordano Orsini, a nobleman of impeccable lineage, with whom she went on to have four children, two girls and two boys. Throughout her marriage Felice maintained a high level of personal and financial independence and fought hard to bring her children to adulthood in a way which made them appreciate and value her heritage as well as their own.

It is in her dealings with the Vatican, both during the Pontificate of her father and that of his successors that the steel of Felice is at its clearest and her subtlety at its greatest, and that she managed to avoid many of the pitfalls that claimed others is an eloquent testimony to her astuteness and strength.

Caroline P Dunphy has brought to life in the most vivid colours a fascinating and tempestuous period in Italian and Vatican history, as well as conclusively demonstrating the achievements that a determined woman could attain even in a renaissance Italy ostensibly dominated by men.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh