

Medieval Church History
(Part 6: The Zenith of Papal Power, 1054-1305)

Synopsis: Between 1054 and 1305 was height of papal temporal power. “Hildebrand was able to humble the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire; Innocent III was powerful enough to force rulers of rising nation-states to do his will; and the papacy inspired the early Crusades. The rise of universities and Scholasticism strengthened the intellectual foundations of papal power. Monastic reform added to papal power by giving the pope many zealous monks, who were his obedient servants. It is doubtful whether the papacy has ever exercised such absolute power over all phases of life as it did in medieval Europe during this era” (209).

I. Gregory VII asserts papal supremacy.

A. The power behind the papal throne.

1. Gregory VII and Innocent III easily dominated the history of the medieval papacy.

- a. “Both men were unwilling to accept the idea that God had given the pope and the temporal ruler coordinate sovereignty over the souls and bodies of men” (209).
- b. Neither pope nor ruler were willing to accept an authority derived from the sovereignty of the other.
- c. No subsequent pope has been able to enforce the sovereignty of the pope as Gregory and Innocent.

2. Hildebrand (ca. 1021-1085).

- a. Laid found on which Innocent was able to build.
- b. His career divides itself into two periods.
 - (i) He was the power behind the papal throne for twenty years before he became pope in 1073.
 - (ii) From 1073 until his death, he exercised the powers he obtained for the popes while he was a humble supporter.
- c. He influenced papal policy under five popes before he finally became pope.
- d. He was small, awkward, with a weak voice, but had the zeal of best Cluniac reformers with whom he agreed: He opposed simony, clerical marriage and lay investiture.
- e. Leo IX gave Hildebrand his chance to become the power behind the papacy by selecting him and other good men from outside Rome to fill important positions in the papal curia.
 - (i) About beginning of 4th Century certain churches in Rome and surrounding areas had been chosen as exclusive sites for baptisms.
 - (ii) The priests of these churches became known as cardinal priests.
 - (iii) Rome had been divided earlier into districts for works of charity. The priests of those areas were known as cardinal deacons.
 - (iv) Bishops near Rome were called cardinal bishops.
 - (v) “These men were the nucleus of what was to become the college of cardinals. Hildebrand was placed in charge of finances of the Roman see and thus became a cardinal” (211).
- f. Hildebrand exercised greater power during the rule of Nicholas II (1058-61), when he helped have ecclesiastical legislation passed that took the power of electing the pope out of hands of the populace of the Roman bishopric with interference often from Emperor and aristocracy.
 - (i) At the Lateran Council of 1059, Nicholas, counseled by Humbert and Hildebrand had the method changed.
 - (ii) When a pope died, the cardinal bishops would meet to consider his successor. They would then consult the cardinal priests and deacons. Afterwards the people of the Roman bishopric were permitted to vote on the nominee.
 - (iii) This, for all practical purposes, put the election of the pope under the control of the college of cardinals.
 - (iv) “This change in electoral procedure placed the choice of the pope within the power of the clergy and eliminated lay control” (211).

B. Hildebrand becomes Pope Gregory VII.

1. Hildebrand was unanimously elected as Pope Gregory VII in 1073. He was now in position to work directly on his ideal, in which the pope would exercise temporal and spiritual power as vice-regent of God.
 - a. He would allow no civil power to dominate the church, rather the church would control the civil power.
 - b. “For this reason, he dedicated himself to the abolition of lay investiture, the practice by which clerical leaders received the symbols of their office from their feudal lord, who was usually a layman” (211-212).

- c. He also tried to eliminate simony and enforce clerical celibacy.
 - d. His *Dictatus Papae*, a document found among his letters after his death, shows his views. “It made the most sweeping claims for papal supremacy that have thus far been noticed. It averred that the Roman church owed its foundation to ‘God alone’; that its pontiff was ‘alone to be called universal’; that he had full power over all bishops; that only his feet should be kissed by ‘all princes’; that he could depose emperors’; and that he might absolve subjects of evil temporal rulers ‘from their allegiance.’ The peak of papal pretension to supremacy was reached in the twenty-second article of the *Dictatus* with the statement that there had never been error in the Roman church and that, according to the Bible, it would never err. Gregory was fully prepared to enforce these claims to temporal as well as spiritual supremacy. He asserted that countries such as England, Hungary, Russia, and Spain had been put under the control of Peter and his successors” (212).
2. Gregory was successful in his war against clerical marriage and simony. The real battle would come with regard to bringing temp rulers under his control. The major struggle of his pontificate, the struggle over lay investiture was inherited from his predecessor Alexander II.
- a. The archbishopric of Milan was open, Henry IV wanted Godfrey, the electoral body of the archbishopric chose Atto. Alexander recognized Atto and just before he died excommunicated Godfrey.
 - b. “His successor, Hildebrand, gladly took up the struggle with Henry. In 1075, a Roman synod forbade any high clergyman to receive investiture to a church office from a layman” (212).
 - c. Henry was also ready for the struggle, but was undisciplined. He took unwise action in his struggle with the pope and soon faced the rebellious feudal lords of Saxony who resented his attempts to make a centralized state in Germany.
 - d. “After making a temporary peace with the Saxon nobles, Henry, five of whose councilors had been excommunicated by Gregory in 1075 for simony, called a council in January 1076 at Worms. The council rejected papal authority. Gregory met this bitter denunciation and rejection of his authority by excommunicating Henry and releasing all his subjects from allegiance to him. This was as bold a step as any pope had ever taken in a dispute with the temporal power, but Henry’s weakness at home gave Gregory hopes of success” (212).
 - e. In the fall of 1076, Henry’s enemies said if he did not get his excommunication removed, they would depose him. They invited Gregory to a synod at Augsburg in the winter.
 - f. “Faced with the danger of losing his throne and humiliation within his own realm if Gregory came to Augsburg, Henry capitulated and, with his wife and his baby son, crossed the Alps in the winter of 1077 to meet Gregory at Canossa. It was a difficult journey; and when Henry finally reached Canossa, Gregory let him stand barefoot in the snow outside the gates of the palace on three successive days before he would admit him to his presence. He then released him from his sentence of excommunication” (213).
 - g. Though humiliated, Henry gained a great deal: He kept Gregory from coming to Augsburg and defeated his German enemies.
 - h. Gregory later excommunicated and deposed Henry a second time, but with Germany’s support, Henry invaded Italy and appointed Wibert as pope. After being crowned by Wibert, he left Italy.
 - i. Gregory asked the Normans of southern Italy to help him; they did, but also pillaged around Rome. Gregory was forced to flee to Salerno. “There this great pope died in exile because, according to him, he ‘loved righteousness, and hated iniquity’” (213).
 - j. The warfare over lay investiture continued until a compromise at the Concordat of Worms between Henry V and Pope Calixtus II in 1122.
 - k. “Free elections of church officers by churchmen were to be held in the presence of the king. The ring and staff, symbols of spiritual power, were to be given to church officials by the pope or his agent, and the church official was to take an oath of loyalty to the temporal ruler who happened to be his feudal overlord. The Roman Catholic church had the better of the king in spite of the compromise reached because it had at least asserted equality with the state and had freed itself of imperial control in Italy. In addition, by his enforcement of clerical celibacy after the ban on clerical marriage in 1074, Gregory had prevented the clergy from degenerating into a hereditary cast and had created a class of men loyal to their spiritual superior, the pope. Though he died in exile, Gregory had done his work, and later popes built on the foundations that he had laid” (213-214).

II. Papal Supremacy under Innocent III.

A. Elected pope in 1198, Innocent III (1161-1216) brought the papacy to its zenith.

- 1. He was the son of a Roman noble, given a fine education in theology at Paris and law in Bologna.

2. “His personal humility and piety were balanced by vigor, common sense, and a strong sense of the moral force that the papacy had” (213).
 3. He believed he was the vicar of Christ, with supreme authority on earth.
 4. He believed that kings and princes derived authority from him, that he could excommunicate, depose or lay an interdict which forbid clergy to perform any but the most essential services of the church, upon the state.
 5. He believed that God gave the task of ruling the world and the church to the successor of Peter.
 - a. The pope was above man and below God.
 - b. The state related to the church as the moon to sun – as the moon shines by reflected light, so the state derives its power from the papacy.
 6. Innocent brought the rulers of the nation-states of England and France under his control and defeated the Holy Roman Emperor.
 7. His position was further strengthened by the *Decretum*, “a complete statement of canon law that could be used in all the courts of the Roman church” (214). This law supported centralization of authority in one individual: the pope.
- B. Innocent began to challenge rulers after his accession to the chair of Peter.
1. Philip Augustus of France had married Ingeborg of Denmark after his first wife died in 1193.
 - a. When his bride came to France, he “took a dislike to her and claimed that he had been bewitched” (214). He forced the French bishops to annul the marriage and took Agnes as his wife.
 - b. Ingeborg appealed to the pope. Innocent ordered Philip to put Agnes away and restore Ingeborg.
 - c. Philip refused, and Innocent put France under interdict in 1200. This “closed all churches, except for the baptism of infants and the granting of extreme unction to the dying; forbade the celebration of the mass, except for those who were sick or dying; and banned burial in the consecrated ground. The priest was not allowed to preach except in the open air” (215).
 - d. The uproar in France was so great, Philip yielded to the pope, reluctantly sent Agnes away and restored Ingeborg.
 - e. Ingeborg was still not happy, but the pope forced one of the rulers of the nation states to obey the moral law.
 2. Between 1205 and 1213, Innocent defeated John of England in his attempt to elect an archbishop of Canterbury.
 - a. Both the archbishop elected by the clergy and the one forced on them by John were set aside. He appointed Stephen Langton instead.
 - b. When John refused to accept him, Innocent placed an interdict on England in 1208 and excommunicated John in 1209.
 - c. John humbled himself for fear of the English people – who were opposed to him – and Philip of France – who was looking for a reason to invade England.
 - d. In 1212, John acknowledged that he held his kingdom as the feudal vassal of the pope and agreed to pay 1000 marks to the pope every year. That payment finally ended at the time of the English Reformation.
 3. In 1202, Innocent asserted the right of the pope to approve or disapprove of the emperor elected by the German electors of the empire.
 - a. When Otto IV forgot his promises made to Innocent at the time of his coronation, Innocent supported the claims of Frederick, son of Henry VI, the Holy Roman Emperor, to the imperial throne, and was able to secure his election.
 - b. When Otto resisted, Innocent called in the armies of Philip II of France, who defeated him at Bouvines in 1214.
 - c. Innocent did however create a problem for his successors. He had twice asked the help of France against John and Otto, which strengthened France, but destroyed the power of the Holy Roman Empire, leaving his successors without a balance of power.
 - d. Boniface VIII would later suffer humiliation at the hands of both the rulers of England and France.
- C. Innocent launched the 4th Crusade to recover Palestine from the Muslims.
1. When boats were needed, the Doge of Venice agreed to supply them for a large sum of money.
 - a. When the Crusaders came without enough money, the Venetians asked for their help to regain Zara from the Christian king of Hungary.
 - b. After sacking Zara, they went to Constantinople instead of Alexandria and captured the city in 1204. A Latin kingdom was set up that lasted until 1261.
 - c. Innocent had not sanctioned this diversion against fellow Christians, but accepted it since it brought the Eastern

empire under his control and gave him a base of operations for a 5th Crusade he was planning against the Muslims.

2. Innocent also sponsored a crusade under Simon de Montfort against the Albigenses of southern France – members of a heretical sect known as the Cathari.
 - a. Because they claimed their beliefs came from the Bible, the Roman church later forbade the people to possess one.
 - b. They left in 1209 and virtually exterminated the Cathari after many bloody battles.
 - c. Heretics as well as temporal rulers had to submit to the supreme head of the Roman church.

D. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.

1. Having abolished this heresy by force, Innocent attempted a positive statement of truth. To do so, he called a general council in Rome.
2. The council made annual confession by laymen to a priest and celebration of the mass at Easter mandatory.
3. They also declared the doctrine of transubstantiation, which all members of the Roman church had to accept as true from that time on.
4. It was a small wonder that men feared the clergy who had the power to give or withhold the life-giving sacraments.

III. Decline of papal power under Boniface VIII.

- A. “The pontificate of Innocent III marked the peak of papal power in Europe. Sordid stories of nepotism, simony, drunkenness, and neglect of their people by the priests antagonized many in the century following Innocent death in 1216. Rulers of such rising nation-states as England and France were more inclined to dispute with the papacy because they had a national army and a wealthy middle class to back them. The humiliation of the Holy Roman Empire by Innocent III left the pope with little support against the French ruler” (217).
- B. If the pontificate of Innocent III was the zenith of papal power in the Middle Ages, that of Boniface VIII between 1294 and 1303 was its lowest point.
 1. More than once, he suffered humiliation at the hands of rulers.
 - a. The greatest was in his struggle with Philip the Fair of France.
 - (i) To help pay for the war between England and France, both Edward I and Philip taxed the clergy.
 - (ii) In 1296 Boniface issued the bull *Clericis Laicos* that forbade the priest to pay taxes to a temporal ruler without papal consent.
 - (iii) Edward outlawed the clergy and had Parliament pass an act forbidding them to acknowledge the pope’s claims to temporal power in England.
 - (iv) Philip also forbade the export of money from France to Italy, depriving the papacy of its French revenues.
 - b. The struggle between Philip and Boniface was renewed in 1301 when Philip arrested a papal legate for treason against the king.
 - (i) Boniface ordered Philip to release him and to come to Rome to explain his actions.
 - (ii) Philip called the Estates General which upheld Philip’s resistance to Boniface.
 - (iii) Boniface then issued *Unam Sanctum*, a bull in which he claimed that “neither salvation nor remission of sins’ could be found outside the Roman church, that the pope as head of the Roman church had spiritual and temporal authority over all, and that submission to the pope was ‘necessary to salvation’” (217).
 - (iv) These same ideas were repeated in *Quanto Conficiamur* issued by Pious IX in 1863.
 - (v) Boniface couldn’t back up his assertions with military power, however, and Philip temporarily imprisoned Boniface to keep him from excommunicating him.
 2. Clement V became pope after the death of Boniface, and he transferred the papal court in 1309 to Avignon, where he and his court were under pressure from the king whose territories were all around them.
 - a. This was Canossa in reverse with a vengeance.
 - b. The removal of the papal seat from Rome in 1309 was the beginning of the era known as the Babylonian Captivity of the papacy.
 - c. Until 1377, the papacy was under the influence of the French monarchs and lost the tremendous power it had had in Europe during the pontificate of Innocent III” (217).