

THE PAPAL MONARCHY AT ITS ZENITH

After tracing the successful struggle of the Popes to assert their supremacy over the Emperors we now turn to a closely connected theme: The parallel development by which the Popes vindicated their long-standing claim to absolute sovereignty over the Church. This development has peculiar significance, since the Popes today still make basically the same claim to sovereignty over the Church, while their struggle with the Emperors has only historical interest.

Papal claims to sovereignty over the Church can be traced back to the fourth century; there is little evidence of any such claim before then. During the first three centuries the organization of the Church developed along the lines of the Roman imperial administration. The churches located in the provincial capitals acquired metropolitan status, which involved a certain amount of jurisdiction over their sister churches, while some acquired suprametropolitan or patriarchal status. This structure allowed for graduated levels of autonomy; it stressed the collegiality of the bishops and their need to meet often in council to exercise their joint responsibility over the life of the Church. It is still the concept of Church order found in St. Augustine, for instance, who with his fellow African bishops resisted the efforts of Rome to encroach on their independence.

However, a much more centralized idea of Church structure was developed in Rome and given definitive

theoretical form by Pope Leo the Great. It saw the Church as a pyramid with its sides converging upon Rome as its apex-a 'system' quite at odds with the African and Eastern conciliar concept. Thanks to many factors, Rome was able to organize the Western Church in accordance with its pyramidal conception. The Popes were so successful in concentrating authority in themselves that the ancient concept of collegiality of bishops was lost, and with it the whole idea of unity in plurality. The entire Church was identified with the local church of Rome; its liturgical and disciplinary customs were made normative for the entire Western Church. It is still today, in spite of Vatican II's revival of collegiality, the ruling curial model of Church authority.

Numerous historical forces converged to establish the Pope in a position of absolute control over the Western Church. Byzantine power over Italy faded away. This left a political vacuum filled by the bishop of Rome, who became the chief political authority in Italy. The papal alliance with the Carolingian monarchy unified the West politically and spiritually around Rome.

The African Church-the only Latin Church with a tradition of resisting Roman encroachments-disappeared under the Moslem deluge. The Anglo-Saxon missions, which were carried out under Roman leadership, tied the English Church closely to the apostolic see. Subsequent Anglo-Saxon missionaries to the Continent brought with them the same concept of a papalist

Church and so effectively subordinated these other churches to Rome.

An indication of the great strides made by the papalist idea of Church authority by the ninth century is the organization under Charlemagne: New ecclesiastical provinces were set up and old ones restored by sole authority of the Holy See. In the early Church such matters were the work of the episcopate in council. Another sign of this advance of papal power is the conferring of the pallium, a band of white wool worn around the shoulder. What was originally a mere honorary ornament now becomes a sign of the authority of Rome over the metropolitan, who received it from the Pope at the time his election was confirmed. The whole ceremony conveyed the idea that the new bishop was a deputy of the Pope.

Various legends also made their contribution to the cause. One of these—the cult of Peter as the gatekeeper of heaven appeared at this time. Brought to the Anglo-Saxons by Roman missionaries, it exerted a powerful influence over them and over their German converts. Another one that had great currency in the early Middle Ages attributed the actual foundation of the principal Western churches to the Roman See.

But most influential of all was the Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals, which were drawn up around 850 in the chancery of a Frankish bishop. This collection contained a clever forgery of authentic papal and conciliar documents which falsified the history of papal relations with the other churches by tracing

papal authority over them back to the earliest period; Popes about whom we actually know nothing were pictured as vigorously exercising authority over the other churches. On such a spurious basis the Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals asserted the absolute and universal supremacy of the successor of Peter: The Pope is sovereign lawgiver whose consent is necessary for the validity of all conciliar decrees. He is likewise supreme judge-no bishop may be deposed without his intervention, and his court is the court of last appeal for all major cases.

Nicholas I (d. 867) utilized the Decretals in his effort to raise the papacy to the position of absolute control over the Church. In unprecedented fashion, he proceeded against the archbishops who were the chief opponents of his program, deposing the archbishops of Cologne and Trier and forcing the most powerful one of all, Hincmar of Rheims (d. 882) to yield in a dispute over the right of one of his suffragans to appeal to Rome. But this movement toward an absolute papal monarchy over the Church was arrested when the papacy was caught in the general breakdown of civilization occurring in the latter part of the ninth century. With the dissolution of the Empire, the papacy fell under the control of the Roman nobility and then of the German Emperors, as we have seen. Nicholas's type of papal sovereignty remained hardly a memory.

But a revival of this idea occurred with the pontificate of Leo IX (1048-54), a Church reformer whose broad

experience in pastoral and diplomatic work, wide travels, and deep reading made the ideal person to raise the papacy once more to a position of leadership over the Church. He made a tour of the churches of Christendom, holding numerous councils that decreed that bishops must be elected by clergy and people and that excoriated the prevailing abuses-simony and clerical marriage. In this way he dramatized the authority and jurisdiction of the papacy and thus conferred the stamp of authenticity on what was for centuries only a theory of canon law. He reorganized the chancery in line with the increased activity of the Popes and brought into the Curia men of talent who were animated with the best ideas of the day. Succeeding Popes carried on in the spirit of Leo, greatly assisted by the election decree of 1059 that gave control over papal elections to the cardinals and enabled them to keep the reforming spirit alive in Rome.

The stage was thus set for the appearance of the fearless

Hildebrand, who took over in 1073 with his exalted idea of papal monarchy. We have already seen his titanic duel with Henry IV over lay investiture. But of much more lasting significance was Gregory's successful assertion of absolute papal power over the Church. Drawing on such sources as ancient canon law as well as the forged Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals, Gregory molded a theory of papal monarchy that he trenchantly expressed in his *Dictatus papae*:

the pope can be judged by no one; the Roman church has never erred and never will err till the end of time; the Roman church was founded by Christ alone; the pope alone can depose and restore bishops; he alone can make new laws, set up new bishoprics, and divide old ones; he alone can translate bishops; he alone can call general councils and authorize canon law; he alone can revise his judgments; his legates, even though in inferior orders, have precedence over all bishops; an appeal to the papal courts inhibits judgment by all inferior courts; a duly ordained pope is undoubtedly made a saint by the merits of St. Peter.

This theory of papal power, joined as it was with a claim to supremacy over society as a whole, has been called "one of the grandest, most integrated, and best-developed systems that has ever been devised for the conduct of human life."

It all required an elaborate machinery that was gradually developed over the next several centuries; the chief instruments used were councils, legates, papal letters, and the Roman tribunals. In each of these departments we see a constant and amazing growth of activity during the following centuries. The Popes became the busiest men in Europe; their interventions reached down into the lowest strata of society.

This centralization, no doubt, met the needs of a world that still rested precariously on the brink of anarchy. Parish priests could find in the papal court protection against eviction and the guarantee of a

minimum income that could not be plundered easily. Both laymen and priests were subject to a discipline that was clear-cut and not too onerous, providing rules for all the main occasions of Christian life-they dealt with baptism, confirmation, confession, communion, penance, alms, usury, last wills and testaments, burials, graveyards, and clerical dress.

In fact, we can safely say that the papal monarchy succeeded only to the extent that it was accepted by large numbers of influential people. The religious orders, for instance, found in papal authority their strongest safeguard against the tyranny of the local bishop or local lord, while the clergy in general reaped substantial benefits from its exercise, including security for their property and immunity from secular jurisdiction.

The Popes at first did not claim the power to appoint the bishops. In fact, they fought the mighty battle over lay investiture to restore the right of election to the clergy and people. Their effort was to some degree a success: By the middle of the twelfth century there was general recognition of the right of the clergy to elect the bishop. However, the elections were often disputed, forcing the Pope to step in as arbiter. This could and often did turn into a long-drawn-out quarrel, with the Pope trying every means to get the rival parties to agree on a candidate before settling the matter by simply appointing a bishop on his own. And by the fourteenth century the Popes solved the problem by simply reserving to themselves the

right to make all episcopal appointments a very imperfect solution, however, since it once more involved the secular ruler, whose co-operation was needed in order to secure compliance with papal appointments.

The imposing papal monarchs of the twelfth century carried on in the Gregorian spirit, devoting themselves with exceptional energy to the task of supervising the spiritual wellbeing of Christendom. When they clashed with the secular princes they usually managed to come out on top. This was true, for instance, in the celebrated affair that pitted the outstanding administrator and canonist, Pope Alexander III (d.1181), against Frederick Barbarossa, the most memorable of Emperors since Charlemagne and one of history's most famous reactionaries. When the Pope opposed his plan to subjugate Italy and suppress the liberty of the Lombard League towns, Barbarossa took Rome by storm and enthroned his own anti-Pope. But Alexander, in alliance with the Lombard towns and backed by the major European powers, dealt a crushing blow to Frederick at the Battle of Legnano (1176). The final act of the drama took place in St. Mark's Square, Venice, where the two protagonists met for a settlement and where Frederick, overcome by sentiments of reverence, threw off his imperial mantle and knelt before the aged Pontiff, who with tears in his eyes raised him and embraced him.

At the same time, another impressive victory of the papacy

over the temporal power occurred in connection with the tragic case of Thomas Becket, former chancellor and intimate friend of English King Henry II. As archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas showed himself fully committed to the Gregorian conception of the Church's authority and refused to barter away what he regarded as essential prerogatives of the Church. Papal authority over the Church was one of the issues at stake, inasmuch as Henry's Constitutions of Clarendon (1164) tried to restore Church-state relations to their pre-Gregorian days by severely limiting papal control over the English Church. Thomas escaped Henry's wrath by fleeing to France in 1164. When he came back in 1170 he was armed with full Powers from the Pope to impose censure on the King if he attempted to revive the constitutions. Thomas's brutal murder in his cathedral at Canterbury in the late afternoon of December 29, 1170, by four of Henry's enraged barons is one of the best-reported events of medieval history. Confronting the archbishop, vested in mitre and cope to celebrate vespers, the barons smashed his skull with their swords, scattering his brains on the stone floor. Before the final blow struck, Thomas was able to murmur, "I accept death for the name of Jesus and his Church." The news of the crime spread quickly and provoked a spontaneous cry of horror throughout Europe in a situation comparable to President Kennedy's assassination in our own day. Henry saved his crown only by submitting to the papal envoys and swearing obedience to Alexander III and promising to

abrogate all his infringements on the authority of the Church and the Pope.

At the time Becket was murdered, Lothario di Segni, an Italian of noble family, was only ten years old. He was destined to become the most powerful of medieval popes-Innocent III. As a young theological student in Paris, di Segni crossed the Channel to see the actual spot of Becket's martyrdom; like Becket he was absolutely devoted to the Gregorian view of papal supremacy. Elected Pope himself in 1198 at the age of thirty-seven, he raised the papacy to its highest medieval level of spiritual and temporal authority.

A man of small stature but enormous talent, admired rather than loved, Innocent had one of the finest legal minds of the age, as is shown by his thousands of letters. They reflect a wide-ranging grasp of the Church's situation and a tremendous concern for its welfare. He advanced the concept of papal sovereignty by claiming that the temporal power itself was derived from the Pope, and he used the comparison of sun to moon to describe the relations between the spiritual and temporal authority. He was the first Pope to take the title Vicar of Christ. By his interventions in the political affairs of Europe he made himself the arbiter of its destiny, and while probably one of the most powerful rulers in its history, he was certainly one of the most intellectual.

A pressing political problem faced him immediately on his taking office: a dispute between two contenders for the imperial crown, Philip and Otto. Innocent's choice

fell on Otto, who in return pledged his assistance in maintaining the independence of the papal states. When war broke out, Otto proved the weaker and was forced to seek refuge in England. But with the help of an assassin who eliminated Philip, Otto finally acceded to the throne. Once crowned, however, Otto reneged on his promises and invaded the papal domain.

The Pope resorted to his ultimate weapons-excommunication and deposition-and then looked around again for another Emperor. This time he chose a youth of sixteen, grandson of Barbarossa, and his own ward-Frederick II, ruler of Sicily. Frederick solemnly swore to keep Sicily separate from the Empire, and in the Golden Bull of Eger (1213) granted the Pope immense authority over the Church in Germany, including the right to decide disputed episcopal elections. But it required another war to settle the issue between Otto and Frederick-England siding with Otto, and France with Frederick. The epochal Battle of Bouvines (1214) decided the question in favor of the papal standard-bearer, Frederick, who would one day out-Otto Otto in treachery toward the papacy.

Probably the greatest triumph of Innocent's spiritual sword was his victory over King John (d. 1216) of England after a quarrel that proved to be a memorable event of the King's reign and of some importance for world history because of its relation to the signing of the Magna Carta. John was a bad man-unbalanced, cruel, cynical, happiest in the company of fellow scoundrels

who enjoyed his rodomontades in mockery of everything serious and sacred. Greedy and indolent, he was to die appropriately from gorging himself with peaches and new cider.

His trouble with Innocent began when in defiance of Canon Law requiring free elections, John tried to impose his own nominee as archbishop of Canterbury. Upon appeal, Innocent decided against John and proposed Stephen Langton for the office. Stephen was duly elected by the clergy, but John refused to allow him entry into England. The Pope, who all along had strictly adhered to Canon Law, had no other alternative but to place England under interdict: No religious services except baptisms and funerals were permitted. The interdict dragged on for nearly six years, while the religious life of England virtually ceased: churches boarded up; bells silent; and priests idle, many of them in exile as John, in retaliation, struck back hard by terrorizing the clergy and confiscating their property.

But Innocent finally brought John to his knees in 1213 when in alliance with Philip Augustus of France, he threatened an invasion of England. It was too much for John; he felt unsure of support from his subjects, whose loyalty had been severely strained by the interdict. He submitted abjectly, performed an act of homage, and placed England under feudal vassalage to the Pope.

But then a paradoxical switch occurred, a second act in the drama, placing the Pope and John together on one side

and Stephen Langton, the archbishop, and the barons on the other. The latter revolted against certain abusive demands and tyrannical acts of the King, and with the advice and support of Langton decided to force a written guarantee of their rights from the King. A duel of wits and arms ensued. John took the cross, pleading a crusader's immunity and claiming the right to papal arbitration. But the barons finally forced him to sign the Great Charter or Magna Carta at Runnymede on June 15, 1215. It consecrated the principle of government by law rather than arbitrary despotism and so represents the beginning of the English Constitution.

It was all only a game for John, however. As soon as he could, he appealed to the Pope as his overlord and was able to have the Charter quashed by Innocent. The Pope was unaware of the actual situation, being preoccupied at the time with his ecumenical council and seeing only the legal aspects of the matter. He thought the charter invalid because it was obtained by force by barons acting as judges in their own case. He excommunicated John's enemies and suspended Langton from office. However, when John died suddenly, most of the nation rallied around the young King, Henry, and the archbishop-reconciled with the Pope during a visit to Rome-came back to act as mediator, resolving the quarrel.

Another King who was forced to recognize Innocent's superior authority was Philip Augustus of France (1180-1223). Some strange physical aversion caused him to separate from his beautiful wife Ingeborg of Denmark on

the very morrow of their wedding in 1193. In spite of failure to obtain an annulment, he began living openly with his mistress while making life as miserable as he could for Ingeborg. She refused to accept her fate and importuned the Pope to grant her justice. His predecessor only temporized-but not Innocent. He resolved to show that Kings too were subject to the moral law, and though he had important political reasons for desiring Philip's friendship, Innocent decided in view of the King's stubbornness to lay an interdict on France. It was only lifted when Philip submitted and acknowledged Ingeborg as his Queen. He still refused to treat her as his wife, however, and the whole affair dragged on for many years, the Pope adamantly refusing to grant a divorce. Finally, after twenty years of struggle, the King suddenly capitulated and restored Ingeborg to all her rights as wife and Queen.

As the chief spiritual authority in Christendom, the great legislator Popes like Innocent were concerned with the whole gamut of human behavior and tried to regulate in detail the life and status of each member of the Church. Their decrees were embodied in the Canon Law, which was the most civilized law of the age and vitally influenced the quality of medieval civilization. These papal laws often took the form of answers to particular queries by the bishops and were-in theory at least-binding on the whole Church. As one of the greatest of the legal geniuses who occupied the throne of Peter, Innocent made a substantial contribution to the mass of

papal decretals that eventually were incorporated into Gregory IX's collection of Decretals (1234)-the first to have the force of universal law.

The legislative career of the Pope reached its climax at the Fourth Council of the Lateran, which he assembled in 1215-the most imposing gathering of the Middle Ages, with its four hundred or more bishops, eight hundred abbots and priors, and numerous ambassadors from all the kingdoms. In accordance with Innocent's constant effort to raise the standards of lay and clerical life, the Council made obligatory annual confession of serious sin and annual reception of the Eucharist. It prescribed the conditions for valid election of bishops, the qualifications for admission to the clergy, and even regulated such details of clerical life as style of dress and types of permissible recreation. Innocent also reorganized the papal Curia to cope with the constantly increasing demands made on it. Three main sections were established: The Chancery, dealing with records and bulls; the Camera, dealing with finances; and the judiciary.

One instrument of papal control over society that originated at this time and that was viewed with much repugnance in later times was the Inquisition. And it is one of Innocent's less glorious titles to fame that he was the first Pope to apply force on a considerable scale to suppress religious opinions. The New Testament certainly contains no basis for a theory of persecution, but after the conversion of Constantine, the Roman Emperors began

the policy of using force against heretics-sometimes even the death penalty. This tactic met with little opposition from the Fathers of the Church. Augustine, in fact, elaborated a whole theology of persecution but, in general, the use of fierce tortures or the death penalty was opposed. But from the middle of the twelfth century we see legal thought, both secular and ecclesiastical, going beyond this-even to sanctioning death as a possible punishment for obstinate heretics. The first such prescription is found in an edict of Peter of Aragon (1197). The chief influences that brought about the change were texts of the Old Testament uncritically and unhistorical interpreted; the great revival of Roman Law, which prescribed the death penalty, for heresy although it was rarely if ever used in Roman times; the fact that with the emergence of Christendom the Church had become an all-inclusive society comparable to the state and in its totality scarcely distinguishable from it so that heretics were viewed as a menace to the social order.

Innocent first found force necessary in dealing with the Cathari, an antisocial sect whose members preached that the material universe was the creation and tool of Satan; hence they condemned the use of all things material, prohibited marriage, encouraged suicide, and in general stood for a morality that strangely combined asceticism and immorality. The movement found a favorable climate in southern France, and in many places even won over the majority of the populace. But until Innocent's time the Popes were too distracted by their

conflicts with the Emperors to give it much attention. With his customary energy and decisiveness, Innocent on taking office immediately took action to stem the tide. His first plan was to use persuasion, and he sent the dynamic preacher Dominic (d. 1221) to France, but ten years of peaceful effort brought little improvement. Then in 1207 Innocent's legate Peter of Castelnau was brutally murdered at the instigation, it seems, of a suspected Catharist, Count Raymond of Toulouse. A need for different tactics seemed imperative. A crusade was proclaimed against these Albigenses, as they were sometimes called: Two big armies under Simon de Montfort converged on southwestern France, stormed the cities of Beziers and Carcassonne, and massacred their inhabitants. Finally, at the Battle of Muret, they decisively crushed the heretics.

It was in connection with this crusade that the papal system of Inquisition originated-a special tribunal appointed by the Popes and charged with ferreting out heretics. Until then the responsibility devolved on the local bishops. However, Innocent found it necessary in coping with the Albigensian threat to send out delegates who were entrusted with special powers that made them independent of the episcopal authority. In 1233 Gregory IX organized this ad hoc body into a system of permanent inquisitors, who were usually chosen from among the mendicant friars, Dominicans and Franciscans, men who were often marked by a high degree of courage, integrity, prudence, and zeal.

Though few of its members were the fanatics and sadists found in lurid anticlerical accounts of the Inquisition, still the system itself offers a disconcerting commentary on medieval standards of justice. Its victims were accused on the basis of anonymous denunciations; they were not allowed witnesses in their favor nor given counsel; the innocent as well as the guilty were often forced to confess by the use of brutal torture, which was definitively prescribed in the bull of Innocent IV of 1252, *Ad extirped*.

There were indeed questionable aspects. But we may say in general that the universal papal monarchy-which dated from Gregory VII and reached its zenith with Innocent III-was in many ways a remarkable success. In all the disorder of the times it represented a stable element and stood for ideas of order and righteousness. By its proclamation of the Truce of God and its ban on tournaments it worked against feudal lawlessness, "while the example which it presented of a spiritual monarchy uniting the nations under its dominion was the very opposite of that anarchy which unrestrained feudalism produced in temporal affairs."a By their pre-eminent interest in the formulation and enforcement of law, these lawyer Popes contributed much to the fundamental order of medieval society and put the modern world very much in their debt.