

THE DECLINE OF THE PAPAL MONARCHY

The successors of Hildebrand succeeded to a remarkable degree in establishing their supremacy over Christendom. Under these imposing papal monarchs Christendom enjoyed its golden age in the thirteenth century-the era of its most splendid achievements, intellectual, artistic, and spiritual. But the onward sweep of history could not be held back, and the rise of national monarchies in the thirteenth century presaged the decline of both the imperial and papal authority and the end of papal Christendom.

The decline of papal authority became evident-ironically in the very aftermath of their complete victory over the Hohenstaufen Emperors. The means used by the Popes to crush the Emperors were, in fact, so political in nature as to obscure the spiritual cause the Popes were trying to uphold. The outcome was a grave loss of their spiritual prestige-a situation that was quickly exploited by the ambitious national monarchs. Philip the Fair of France led the onslaught of the nation states on the papal monarchy when he literally kidnaped Pope Boniface VIII and then constrained Boniface's successor to remain in France. The subsequent Avignon period of the papacy (1305-78) saw a further weakening of papal authority as it became identified in the popular mind rightly or wrongly-with French interests.

The conflict with the Hohenstaufen Emperors in the thirteenth century was merely another chapter—the most consequential, it is true—in the struggle between the papacy and German Empire that began with Hildebrand. To understand this struggle it is important to keep in mind that the Popes did not claim authority over the temporal order as such but only insofar as it involved moral decisions. But as is still true today, the precise boundaries between the purely temporal and the spiritual, or as we would say today, between Church and state, were nearly impossible to define, and peculiarly so at that juncture of human history when there was no thought of trying to separate them. The Popes consistently upheld the Gelasian theory according to which they had the right and the duty to oblige princes to rule according to the principles of divine justice. While admitting this in theory, perhaps, the Emperors, on the other hand, were reluctant to accept papal dictates that interfered with their actual exercise of power. Another potent issue bearing on the struggle was the conflicting claims of Emperor and Pope to control the ancient capital of Rome. The Popes could not relinquish their rule over Rome and the Papal States without jeopardizing their necessary independence, while the Emperors wanted to possess Rome in order to secure their power in the Italian peninsula as compensation for their inability to control the rebellious German feudal nobility.

The struggle of the papacy with the Hohenstaufens can be traced to the pontificate of Innocent III, who successfully deposed Emperor Otto and personally

selected the young prince who was to replace him-his own ward and the grandson of Barbarossa, Frederick Hohenstaufen, the King of Sicily. Ironically, Frederick, whose reign stretched from 1211 to 1250, proved to be the most dangerous of all the adversaries of the papacy, and the conflict between himself and the Popes ultimately proved disastrous for both institutions.

Relations with Frederick began on a good note. In return for Innocent's help in securing the imperial crown, he issued,

as we have said, the Golden Bull of Eger (1213), which recognized and guaranteed the integrity of the Papal States including its recent acquisitions, and emancipated the German Church from imperial control by guaranteeing free episcopal elections and conceding to the papacy the right to decide disputed elections. The satisfaction of both Frederick and the Pope was manifest in Frederick's coronation ceremony at Rome in 1220. Frederick was solemnly escorted through the town by a colorful retinue; he knelt before Innocent's successor, Pope Honorius, kissed his feet, and was then anointed by the Pope on the arm and between the shoulder blades. Then clad in the imperial vestments, Frederick entered St. Peter's; through the silver gate. The Pope there crowned him with miter and crown and handed him the sword, which he lustily brandished three times to show that he was the protector of St. Peter, after which he received the scepter and imperial orb. At the High Mass that followed, he received communion at the Pope's hands and the kiss of peace. Finally all moved in

procession outside, where the Emperor held the stirrup of the Pope's horse and led him a few paces forward before mounting his own white horse to return to his camp.

But Frederick soon aroused suspicion when he began to make aggressive moves against the Lombard towns-which the Curia saw naturally as a prelude to an attack on the Papal States. Pope Honorius, mild and conciliatory temporized, but his successor, Gregory IX (d. 1241), a marvelous, energetic seventy years old, decided to meet the issue squarely. In 1227 he excommunicated Frederick-ostensibly for procrastinating in the fulfillment of his vow to go on crusade-and declared a holy war against him. It was a battle of titans: Frederick-short and stout with red hair, physically unprepossessing, a genius of sorts-was deceitful, cruel, sensual, and bizarre in his tastes. His allies regarded him with suspicion; his enemies saw him as anti-Christ. But no one denied his extraordinary talent for governing men.

In material strength the Pope was definitely at a disadvantage: He had no army of his own except for some small levies off the papal estates, and while he could call on help from his allies in the Lombard cities, they were too often busy fighting among themselves. As Pope he was head of a vast, well-organized institution, it is true, but he could not always depend on the obedience of the bishops, while his own turbulent city of Rome was unpredictable in its loyalties. This was true even of the College of Cardinals. But Frederick too had handicaps. His German followers showed only weak loyalty, and he was never able

to put more than fifteen thousand men on the field at any one time. Even the small Italian cities could withstand him for months.

After some indefinite skirmishes, peace was patched up for a time. But after Frederick's victory over the Lombard town of Cortenuova in 1238, Gregory again excommunicated him. At every High Mass in every church throughout the world, the priest to the accompaniment of bell and burning candle was to proclaim Frederick's expulsion from the community of believers. .And Gregory shot a frenzied encyclical at him that began with the words: "Out of the sea rises up the Beast, full of the names of blasphemy who raging with the claws of the bear and the mouth of the lion and the limbs and likeness of the leopard, opens its mouth to blaspheme the Holy Name and ceases not to hurl its spears against the tabernacle of God and against the saints who dwell in heaven. . . ." Frederick was, the encyclical continued, ". . . a scorpion spewing passion from the sting of his tail . . . a dragon . . . a hammer of the world. . . ,"

To deal with the situation, Gregory summoned a council to meet in Rome, but Frederick waylaid the cardinals attending it and fettered them in golden chains. Three months later, in August 1241, Gregory lay dead.

After an incredible conclave lasting almost two years, a successor was chosen-but he died before being consecrated. Then a Genoese was elected, Fieschi, who

had previously shown signs of friendliness to Frederick. The Emperor breathed a sigh of relief and waited for the new Pope Innocent IV to lift his excommunication. But Frederick miscalculated. Innocent realized that it would have to be a fight to the finish, since Frederick would exploit any compromise in order to reduce the Church to servility. Innocent pretended therefore to negotiate, while stalling for time. When his plans were laid, Innocent escaped to Lyons, in France, called a general council of the Church, and in 1245 once more solemnly excommunicated and deposed Frederick as a sacrilegious, notorious, heretical blasphemer and oppressor of the Church.

Frederick's wrath knew no bounds. "I have been anvil long enough," he cried, "now I shall play the hammer."² The war that ensued covered all of Italy, spread to Germany, and shook Christendom to its foundations—proving, in fact, disastrous for both Empire and papacy. Scenes of horror were enacted in towns and cities all over Europe as partisans of Pope and Emperor, opposing parties called Guelf and Ghibelline, fought for control. Frederick saw papal assassins and conspirators in every shadow and treated hapless suspects with the utmost barbarism: He had them blinded with red hot irons, dragged to death by horses over stony ground, sewn up in leather sacks with poisonous snakes, and tossed into the sea. The Pope for his part mobilized every resource of the Church and effectively deployed his spiritual artillery: indulgences for fighting the holy war against Frederick, excommunication,

interdict. With magnificent concentration, he strained every fiber of the Church in order to crush one of the most lethal enemies it ever faced.

Frederick seemed on the point of victory when he suffered a terrible defeat in 1248 at Parma, which he had had under siege for several years. Taking advantage of his absence, while he was out hunting, the besieged Parmans burst from behind their walls and burned down his camp, an entirely new city called Vittoria. He was able to recover, however, and again seemed near victory when he was struck down by illness and succumbed in 1250; he died clothed in Cistercian robes after receiving the last sacraments from his chief counselor, Archbishop Berard. Frederick's body was carried to the cathedral of Palermo and buried in a majestic sarcophagus of dark-red porphyry. With him were buried the Hohenstaufen dreams of world empire.

Henceforth the Popes were determined to keep Sicily and the Empire separate. Their first problem therefore was to find a ruler for Sicily who would have no claim to the Empire.

This obviously ruled out the Hohenstaufen descendants of Frederick: his sons, Manfred and Conrad, and his grandson, Conradin. The Curia finally found what they were looking for in Charles of Anjou, the brother of the King of France, Louis IX, who later was canonized. Charles solemnly agreed to keep Sicily and the Empire separate. The success of the papal policy was consummated when the other crown-the Empire's-was

after a long interregnum finally conferred on Rudolf of Hapsburg, a pious and worthy candidate who promised to be docile and who was elected Emperor in 1273.

In the meantime, Charles of Anjou managed to secure his hold over Sicily by two great victories: Manfred was slain in battle, and the last Hohenstaufen heir, Conradin, a youth of sixteen, was captured and beheaded in a square at Naples in 1268. His tragic fate secured the papal victory over the Hohenstaufens, but the Popes paid a high price for it. Their use of spiritual weapons in what seemed to many a mere political struggle greatly lowered papal prestige and authority in the public estimation.

Charles, the conqueror of Sicily, found his work all cut out for him. The Sicilians were a haughty people who fiercely resented the French occupation and hated the French soldiers. Notoriously adept at intrigue and conspiracy, the Sicilians began to plot the regime's overthrow. A few French soldiers provided the spark when they recklessly made advances to some pretty maidens during Easter festivities in a crowded Church piazza at Palermo on Easter Monday in 1282. A brawl turned into a riot; the cry "Death to the French" echoed quickly across the island, and there was a wholesale slaughter of the French garrison. These "Sicilian Vespers" marked the end of Charles Anjou's rule in Sicily.

The revolution wrote a glamorous chapter in the Sicilian struggle for liberty, but it proved to be an absolute catastrophe for the spiritual authority and prestige of the

Holy See-turning into a kind of Vietnam for the papal monarchy. It involved the Popes in a disastrous crusade against the rebels that in the end was unsuccessful. Charles was unable to restore French rule over the island. The humiliation for the papacy was crushing: As with Frederick, the papacy had thrown everything into the struggle—men, money, and spiritual weapons, and all to no avail. The previous affair with the Hohenstaufens was bad enough; but the sight of the Vicar of Christ using spiritual weapons in order to subjugate a free, dam-loving people was too much. The conscience of Europe was dismayed. How far respect for papal authority was eroded was soon to be revealed.

The Sicilian war dragged on, and the next papal election found the College of Cardinals bitterly divided over the succession in Sicily and grouped around two powerful Roman families: the Orsini, who favored the French descendants of Charles of Anjou; and the Colonna, favoring the Spanish House of Aragon. The deadlock was finally broken by one of the strangest occurrences in the history of papal elections: Someone shouted the name of Peter Morrone, a barely educated hermit famed for holiness; all present felt inspired by the Holy Spirit, and suddenly and enthusiastically responded to the weird suggestion. The startled monk was brought from his mountain retreat and crowned Pope Celestine V.

He proved totally unequal to the demands of the office, disgusting the cardinals with his eccentricities; ineptitude, and subservience to Charles of Naples, who

practically held him in captivity. Fortunately Celestine had the good sense to realize what harm he was doing to the Church, and stepped down in 1294 after less than a year—the last Pope to resign the august office voluntarily. The cardinals, with a sigh of relief, immediately elected Benedict Gaetani, a tall, bald, cleanshaven diplomat with prominent ears and strongly marked features who had made a brilliant curial career, tarnished only by his blunt incisiveness and fearful outbursts of temper. As Boniface VIII (1294-1303) he began a reign that was to mark a watershed in European and Church history.

Few Popes had a more exalted sense of papal authority, and few were as energetic in its exercise. Boniface promulgated his own revision of Canon Law—the Sext; he proclaimed the first papal jubilee, in 1300, which drew a million pilgrims to Rome; he intervened constantly in the affairs of individual dioceses. In Italy he pursued tenaciously the papal policy of guaranteeing the independence of the Papal States by a system of direct conquest and alliances. He was determined, like his predecessors, to impose a papal vassal on Sicily, but like them he failed and finally settled for a compromise peace.

On the international stage, where the defeat of the Hohenstaufen left no serious rival to papal authority, Boniface acted as the unchallenged arbiter of European affairs. But this situation was not destined to last very long. A new political force was beginning to gain momentum: nationalism. It would replace the idea of Christendom with the theory that the largest autonomous unit should be the

territorial or national state. It was espoused by various monarchs who gradually built up their power over their people in hopes of shaking off the papal yoke as soon as they were strong enough.

Such a monarch was Philip the Fair, who reached the throne of France in 1285. He was an extremely amoral and cunning tyrant whose only aim in life was the creation of a strong French nation. It was fateful for the future of the papacy that precisely at that juncture a profoundly conservative and intransigent man should occupy the seat of Peter, a Pope unable even to imagine what a new world of nation states might mean for the Church.

The conflict between Boniface and Philip began over the issue of clerical taxation. Like other Kings of Europe busy consolidating their realms, Philip needed money and found the wealth of the Church a temptation too great to resist. When he imposed some extremely heavy taxes on the clergy, Boniface responded with his maladroit bull *Clericis Laicos* (1296), which levied excommunication on anyone taxing clerical property without authorization from the Holy See. Philip retaliated by forbidding the export of any monies from France-cutting off a major source of papal revenue. But a final confrontation was postponed when both sides accepted a compromise solution.

Philip remained fixed, however, in his resolve to break the Church and make it a useful servant, only biding his time until he enjoyed more favorable political conditions. Apparently he felt the time was ripe in 1301, when he intervened in the case of the maverick bishops of Pamiers,

who was arrested and accused of a variety of crimes. In violation of clerical immunity, Philip subjected him to a trial that was a caricature of justice and that Philip no doubt regarded as a kind of trial balloon-if he could get away with it, he would know what to do next. For Boniface it was the climax of the perfidious King's outrages against the Church and he would not let it pass. His bull *Ausculda Fili* was' outspoken: It reminded Philip of his subordination to the Pope (*ratione peccati*-where there was a question of sin involved), it listed Philip's crimes, and it summoned the French bishops to a council to be held at Rome.

And now Philip made his appeal to the new historical force, national sentiment, which was invulnerable to the spiritual weapons of the Pope. Launching a new and powerful weapon-public opinion-he mobilized an unscrupulous smear campaign against Boniface. A falsified bull was circulated representing the Pope as claiming direct temporal power over the king. When the public showed itself properly outraged at this supposed example of papal arrogance, Philip convoked the three estates to register public support-a concerted defiance of Rome that marked a new advance in the history of the French Government. By trickery and duress he won over at least half of the clergy.

It was amid these depressing circumstances-with only half of the French bishops present at the council the Pope had called to Rome-that Boniface promulgated the bull *Unam Sanctam*, the most famous statement of papal

prerogatives. It set forth no new doctrines; it spent little time on argument or proof, but merely reiterated in resounding trumpet blasts of Latin the traditional claim of the papacy to ultimate sovereignty over the Christian European social order. This, it says, is a power given by Christ to St. Peter, an ordinance established by God that must be obeyed. The Pope can be judged by no man but by God alone; no earthly power can claim independence of the Pope, and insofar as any act has moral implications, it is subject to his judgment. The temporal power is therefore subordinate to the spiritual power, and every human creature must be subject to the Roman Pontiff. Philip called a meeting of his council that included a good representation of the higher clergy. This assembly then issued a call for a general council of the Church and drew up a tremendous indictment of Boniface. An ingenious mixture of truth and fantasy, it seized on trivial incidents and magnified angry casual utterances of the Pope as though they were doctrinal declarations. The Pope was accused of being an open materialist, with no faith in the immortality of the soul; of not believing in transubstantiation, of neglecting to fast, of forcing priests to reveal the secrets of the confessional; of practicing nearly every form of sexual misconduct; of keeping a private demon and consulting sorcerers; of being an outrageous simonist; of setting up silver images of himself in the churches; and of desiring the ruin of France. There was no attempt here to face the real issue as defined by Unam Sanctam. Philip's document concentrated on Boniface the man, and in its very excess of

vituperation showed up the very real weakness of Philip's case.

Boniface had not yet taken the final step: excommunication. But now he acted. At his residence in Anagni, his native city, situated on a rocky crag above the broad valley of the Sacco River south of Rome, he prepared the bull that would excommunicate Philip and release his subjects from their obedience. But a daring plan had already been concocted by the King: His henchman Nogaret was ready to capture the Pope and bring him to France, where he would be forced to summon a council, which would then depose him. Nogaret was already in Italy when he heard of the impending bull. He acted swiftly. On September 3, 1303, with three hundred horsemen and a thousand foot soldiers, he entered the town under cover of early-morning darkness through a gate left open by traitors and forced his way up the narrow streets to storm the papal palace. After a day of desperate fighting, his troops battered down the doors and found the aged Pope dressed in full regalia and, according to some accounts, seated on his throne with the cross in his hands.

Nogaret was unable to carry away his prisoner, however. The mercurial townspeople suffered a change of heart, rallied, and rescued the Pontiff. But the eighty-five-year-oldman could not long survive such a trauma and died within a month.

As the drama at Canossa ushered in the period of papal greatness, so the tragedy at Anagni signaled its decline. The events of the next decade showed how

surely Philip had gained the upper hand over the Popes. The next Pope died almost immediately after election. His successor-elected after a long deadlock-was a Frenchman, Bertrand de Got, archbishop of Bordeaux, who was still in France at the time of his election and was crowned Clement V in Lyons. Amiable, vacillating, and sickly, he was no match for the King. Philip was able to detain him in France by blackmailing him with the threat of staging a posthumous trial of Boniface. Using the same threat, he wrenched from Clement a condemnation of the Knights Templars at the Council of Vienne in 1312 to serve his own political purposes; it was one of the most scandalous defeats ever suffered by the papacy.

In 1305 Clement transferred the papal court to Avignon in southern France, thus beginning the Avignon period of the papacy-the time when the Popes ruled the Church from this town. Their stay here lasted until 1378, embracing the pontificates of seven Popes, and marked a further stage in the decline of the papal monarchy.

Avignon was an ideal location for the peaceful refuge, since its neighboring comtat, Venaissin, already belonged to the Holy See; it was strongly fortified and close to Italy. Clement thought of it only as a temporary residence while he cleared up the vexing problems raised by the French King. But once the Popes were established there, many factors prolonged their stay: the constant turbulence in Italy, incessantly at war; the intrigues of the French Kings, who hoped to use the papacy for their interests; the preponderance of French cardinals in the

Curia; the illness of several Popes, and finally, their renewed, anticlimactic struggle with the Holy Roman Emperors, which increased the Popes' dependence on the good will of the French King.

At the accession of John XXII, Clement's successor, in 1316, it was quite obvious that the papacy had fallen on hard times. The Curia was disorganized by a long vacancy, the apostolic treasury exhausted by Clement's extravagances and its independence compromised by the intrigues of Philip. The Papal States were engulfed in war. A massive effort was obviously called for if the papacy was to survive as the chief spiritual power in Christendom.

To the credit of the Avignon Popes, it can be said that at least they tried. Without exception worthy and religious men, even austere in some cases, they consistently pursued the goal of reorganizing the administration of the Church, refurbishing its finances, combating heresy, reforming abuses, proclaiming new Crusades, and propagating the Gospel. They labored tirelessly and effectively to revitalize their authority and make its influence felt in every corner of Christendom. They strengthened their control over appointments, even at the parish level. They encouraged the practice of appeals to papal tribunals. They strove with great energy for reform and did their utmost to restore to the cloisters the practice of poverty, work, and study.

Much of their work for reform was undone by forces beyond their control. One such force was the terrible Black Death, a quickly fatal disease spread by the black

rat. The Black Death decimated the population of Europe, periodically flaring up every ten years or so after its initial outbreak in 1348. It depopulated the convents, depleted the ranks of the clergy, and profoundly disrupted monastic life. Besides, there were the continual wars waged by freebooters who roamed the countryside and found monasteries and convents particularly good targets to sack; they laid waste their fields, driving out the monks and violating the nuns. Amid all the disorder, many monasteries virtually expired, and the number of wandering monks increased, many of them swelling the bands of flagellants and fanatics—a dangerous rabble who seized Church property, defied all authority, and preached revolution. In their efforts to govern the Church effectively in a time of extreme disorder, the Avignon Popes were hard pressed for money. As the first rulers in Europe to institute a regular system of taxation, the Popes had over the centuries developed a mighty fiscal machine that the Avignon Popes under the stress of new necessities now raised to a degree of efficiency unrivaled by any secular government. A vast array of ingenious taxes and fees were levied on bishops, abbots, and pastors. Some were payable directly to the Curia, some were collected by papal collectors who often had to resort to harsh measures to squeeze payment out of recalcitrants. Thus on July 5 1328, in a single papal audience, no fewer than one patriarch, five archbishops, thirty bishops, and forty-six abbots were excommunicated for default on their taxes. Naturally, all of this provoked lively criticism at times and sometimes even

rebellion. Contemporary chronicles tell of papal tax collectors being hunted down, thrown into dark prisons, mutilated, and even strangled by irate debtors.

These Avignon Popes—rightly or wrongly—put great faith in the efficacy of external pomp. In an age of increasing wealth, they felt it necessary to display a magnificence on a scale equal to their claims. A massive palace was built whose forbidding parapets still dazzle the eye of the tourist. A crowd of courtiers—knights, squires, and chamberlains, their ranks swelled by an army of hungry benefice seekers—filled the spacious rooms. The palace's luxurious furnishings were the talk of Europe. Avignon outshone all other courts by the extravagance of its style and the brilliance of its feasts. It was soon reckoned the most civilized court in Europe—a magnet for artists and scholars.

It was unfortunate that the Popes built up their administration and power without giving much attention to the remarkable revival of mystical devotion produced by the disasters of the fourteenth century or to the rise of an educated laity. And it seemed most questionable whether they could transform the hierarchy into a more spiritual-minded body of men living in closer conformity to the Gospel.

It was their constant intention to return to Italy as soon as they could pacify their rebellious states. A talented general was found in the person of Gil Albornoz, who was commissioned in 1352 to reimpose papal rule over the states. This was a heroic task, since they were in a state of near disintegration. The general's resources were meager at

a time when warfare was becoming very expensive, with the advent of gun powder; rude cannons now could fire five-pound iron balls, and soldiers had to be equipped with muskets and guns. But thanks to indomitable courage and skill, Albornoz was able to subdue the rebellious towns; he deserves the title Second Founder of the Papal States.

Escorted by two thousand men-at-arms, Pope Urban V entered Rome on October 16, 1367. The rejoicing of Christendom was premature, however, for Urban soon felt the ground moving beneath him as discord broke out in Rome. Longing for the sweetness and peace of his native land, he returned to Avignon. But his successor, Gregory (1370-77), realized that papal authority over the states might be fatally jeopardized if the Pope did not return soon and permanently to govern his Italian subjects-and urged on by St. Catherine of Siena, he once more returned to Rome. But, Hardly had he time to size up the situation before death earned him off on March 27, 1378. As the cardinals gathered in Rome to elect the next Pope, it was evident that the papal monarchy was at a turning point. The big question was: Could its decline be arrested?