



The Most Holy Trinity May 26, 2013 C

Church History (Part 6)

The High Middle Ages

The Age of Christendom — 1000-1200AD

The term Middle Ages usually refers to the period in history that extends from the end of the Greco-Roman civilization to the beginning of the Renaissance. Historians differ in their dating of this period. Some fix it from the death of Pope Gregory the Great (604) to the Pontificate of Celestine in 1294.

In Church history, the years 1000-1200AD are often called the High Middle Ages because of the strength of the papacy, the impact of several new religious orders on the life of the Church, the creation of great new centers of learning with great theologians like Thomas Aquinas, and the construction of hundreds of Gothic-style churches. In this column, we will look at:

- ◆ Rise of the medieval papacy
- ◆ Crusades
- ◆ The Inquisition

Rise of the medieval papacy

The High Middle Ages is marked by the reign of several formidable popes. Many of these popes are monks and part of the Cluniac reform which helps tremendously to bring spiritual reform to the Church and free it from lay investiture. Let us now look at some of these reformer popes.

St. Leo IX (1049-1054). Leo, a simple monk, travels widely fighting the abuses of lay investiture, simony and clerical concubinage.

Pope Nicholas II (1058-1061). For centuries, popes are elected by the people of Rome, although too frequently the elections are controlled by kings, emperors or competing noble Roman families. To protect the papacy from corrupt influences and state control, Nicholas creates a group of cardinal-bishops who would act as the pope's representatives in various parts of the empire. He also decrees that, henceforth, only the **College of Cardinals** can elect a pope by a two-thirds majority vote. Despite this new law, secular rulers continue to interfere with the papal elections. Sometimes, even Church leaders fail to follow this new rule.

Gregory VII (1073-1085). Gregory, a monk from Cluny, is acclaimed pope *during* the funeral Mass of his predecessor. He tries to back out since the cardinals are not following the decree of Nicholas that only cardinal-bishops can elect a pope. Despite his reluctance, Gregory is practically dragged to the Church of St. Peter in chains and installed as pope. Previous to being pope, he was very involved in four previous papacies, giving advice on every political and religious move.

Gregory's papacy is one of the most powerful in the history of the Church. He not only brings spiritual reform to the Church, but will also gain for the Church unparalleled status and power in Europe for the next two hundred years.

Gregory's first action is to declare that all clergy, including bishops, who obtained orders by simony (practice of buying or selling a holy office or position) are to be removed from their parishes and dioceses immediately under pain of excommunication. He also insists on clerical celibacy which in most places is not being observed.

Gregory also fights against lay investiture, the practice by which a high ranking layperson (such as the emperor or king, count or lord) can appoint bishops or abbots, "investing" them with power and requiring their loyalty.

When the German emperor, Henry IV, pushes back against Gregory's reforms, he excommunicates the emperor and tells his subjects that they do not need to obey him any longer. Frightened by this, Henry, dressed in penitential garb, crosses the Alps for the Castle at Canossa, Italy. After receiving the Pope's forgiveness, he quickly returns to Germany and reestablishes his power there. There he gathers his armies, marches on Rome, exiles Gregory and replaces him with an anti-pope. Shortly after, Gregory dies proclaiming: "*I have loved justice and hated iniquity; therefore, I die in exile.*"

Concordat of Worms. In 1122, the controversy over lay investiture is resolved with the Concordant of Worms (Worms, Germany) whereby the emperor agrees that secular rulers will no longer have the right to appoint bishops: all bishops will be elected and consecrated by Church authority.

Innocent III (1160-1216). It is generally agreed that papal power in the past 2,000 years reaches its high point during the papacy of Innocent III, elected pope in 1198 at the age of 37. Unlike some of his strong predecessors who are monks, Innocent is a canon lawyer and an expert in Church governance. Having an exalted image of the papacy, Innocent sees himself as the “Vicar (representative) of Christ,” who is set above man to govern not only the universal Church but the whole world.

In dealing with secular rulers, Innocent’s great spiritual weapons are *excommunication* and *interdict*. He imposes *excommunication* against individuals, including kings and emperors who cross him, and *interdict* on nations (ban on administering sacraments, except Baptism, in a country). Innocent places England under interdict when King John refuses to accept the pope’s candidate as archbishop of Canterbury. When the leading nobles of England side with the pope, the king is made to repent and to submit to becoming Innocent’s vassal, requiring him to pay a sizable feudal tax to the pope. When the German emperor invades Sicily, Innocent excommunicates him. Under threat of excommunication, Innocent forces the king of France to return to his wife. When a group of heretics in France refuses to repent, he launches a crusade against them. We can see why many would accuse Innocent of trying to convert the papacy into a *theocracy* (form of government in which all civil power rests in the hands of religious authorities).

Innocent sets out to reform the Church. He reduces the luxury of the papal court and involves bishops more actively in the administration of the Church. He presides over the *Fourth Lateran Council* (1215) attended by some 1,200 bishops, abbots and other church leaders. The Council examines every aspect of the Church’s life and regulates it by decree. Amongst its many decrees are the fixing of the number of sacraments at seven, defining the doctrine of transubstantiation, and declaring the reception of Confession and Eucharist obligatory at least once a year (usually during the Easter season). Innocent is the pope who approves two religious orders that bring great spiritual life to the Church: the Franciscans and the Dominicans. He also reconciles many heretics and schismatics to the Church.

Christendom. Historians generally agree that Innocent III established the thirteenth century as the height of Christendom (not to be confused with Christianity). Christianity is the religion of the followers of Jesus Christ. Christendom refers to the cultural world that comes into existence during the High Middle Ages in

Europe. This is a period in which nearly everyone is Catholic, and Catholicism influences every aspect of people’s lives.

The Crusades (1095-1291)

During the High Middle Ages, the Muslim religion becomes a big threat to Christianity. It takes over the part of the world most sacred to Christians—Palestine—what will later be known as the Holy Land. The Muslims seem poised to overrun Constantinople, the See of the Eastern Church. Turkish Muslims start to attack Christians who are travelling to the Holy Land. In response to the Muslim threat, the popes and Christian rulers conceive the idea of the Crusades as a way to free the Holy Land from the Muslims and to prevent them from making more inroads into Christian territories. Initially, the Crusades are seen as an act of faith, as a holy war against infidels. In exchange for participation, Crusaders are promised special graces. If they die in battle, they will be regarded as martyrs. Economic and political factors are also involved in the crusading spirit as landless peasants and lords hope to gain land from the Muslims.

With the blessing of Pope Urban II, the **First Crusade** (1095-1099) sets out to assist the Byzantine church which is being oppressed with the ascendancy of the Muslim Turks, and to free Jerusalem from Muslim control.

The Crusade is a success in that it recaptures Jerusalem. However, it also is a terrible failure and scandal because of the slaughter of thousands of men, women and children—Muslims and Jews alike, who are both seen as infidels. A few decades later, the Muslims will win back control of Jerusalem.

The **Second Crusade** (1147-1149) is preached by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (which tells us how holy men in those days saw the Crusades as a holy cause). Even though this crusade is led by a German Emperor and a French King, it is a big failure.

The **Fourth Crusade** launched by Pope Innocent III is intended to win back control of Jerusalem from the Muslims. On their way, the Crusaders stop off at Constantinople to get supplies for their ships. When they see how beautiful the city is, they ransack it. They break into churches and destroy or steal precious shrines. Worse still, they replace the Greek Patriarch and its liturgy with a Western and Latin bishop, imposing on the Eastern Church for about fifty years the Roman way of running the church.

When Pope Innocent hears how the Crusaders looted Constantinople, he becomes furious. However, he

approves the replacement of the Eastern Church patriarch with a Western bishop hoping this would bring together the Eastern and Western churches. While such a move temporarily reunites the Christian Church, the long term effect is a deepening of the division and bitterness between the Eastern and Western Christians. The Eastern Catholics will not forget for a long time what the Crusaders did to them and their city.

The so-called *Children's Crusade* (1212) is the most notable of the misguided efforts. The call to march to Jerusalem and reclaim the city in God's name is answered by many children. In 1212, the children set out but are soon destroyed by disease, starvation, and the climate. Those who survived are sold into slavery to the Turks. The other Crusades also fail to achieve their intended goals.

Commenting on the Crusades, Fr. Alfred McBride writes: "*Historically, the Crusades mark a bloody page in the story of a violent time. They remind us that holy war is a perversion of God's will and a disgrace to Christian moral behavior. The Crusades should teach us that holy wars have no place in Christianity; they are anti-Christian in theory, practice and outcome*" (The Story of the Church, p.121).

Yet, the Crusades have some, perhaps unintended, positive results.

- ◆ Economically, the Crusades open up trade with the East. The crusaders bring back all kinds of good and inventions.
- ◆ Through contact with Muslim scholars, the crusaders learn of advances in architecture, astronomy, mathematics and science.
- ◆ The crusaders acquire Arabic commentaries on Aristotle which significantly contribute to the revival of Catholic philosophy and theology. All of the above discoveries will lead to a period in Western history called the Renaissance.

The Inquisition

The Inquisition is established to serve as a legal inquiry into possible heretical teaching that threatens the truth and integrity of Catholic faith. To place the Inquisition in its historical context, it should be noted that European Christians of the Middle Ages—from peasant farmers to kings—consider heresy a great evil which could lead to one's eternal damnation. Heresy is also seen as a threat not only to the Church but also to society, and could tear civilization apart. Hence, not only Church leaders but also state authorities want to protect both Church *and* society from the evil of heresy.

It is the *Albigensian* heresy (named after the town of Albi in South France where the heresy is most prominent) that led to the creation of the Inquisition. Many of the Christian clergy and monks in monasteries in southern France are living a lavish lifestyle while neglecting to preach and live the Gospel. This scandal drives many Christians to turn to a simple lifestyle. Unfortunately, the Albigensians tend to take a good impulse to the extreme. For instance, they teach that marriage, as well as the body, are evil. Throughout Christian history, heresies have often begun as correctives for church practices that needed to be challenged. This is certainly the case with the Albigensian heresy. However, a legitimate challenge to church practice or belief sometimes turns into an over-reaction. It becomes a heresy when some essential aspect of the faith—in this case, the goodness of creation and the sacredness of human life—is denied.

Pope Innocent III tries to convert the Albigensians by sending them a new kind of monk, one who embraces a simple lifestyle. When the Albigensians assassinate a representative of the pope, Innocent calls for a military Crusade against them. While the Crusade slaughters large numbers of Albigensians, it fails to root them out completely. In desperation, Innocent's successor, Gregory IX, initiates the Papal Inquisition in 1232.

The purpose of the Papal Inquisition is, first of all, to identify the heretics and, second, to persuade them to give up their heresy. If the heretic confesses and repents, he is given a penance. If the heretic refuses to renounce his false belief, the punishment is severe, such as life in prison or death by burning at the stake.

At least with the Papal Inquisition, a person is brought before a jury and has a chance to prove his innocence. This is not the case with most civil trials, in which a king or lord could condemn a person to death for a rather trivial offense. In his book *A Popular History of the Catholic Church*, Carl Koch states: "*One famous papal inquisitor known for his severity turned over for punishment just 5 percent of those who were brought to trial*" (p.151).

While the Inquisition succeeds in putting fear in the hearts of men and women, many see it as a necessary evil. Like the Crusades, the Inquisition shows us how easily religious zeal and good intentions can be turned into great mistakes with tragic outcomes.

Have a blessed week,

