

# THE PAPACY

*The most visible sign of the power of the Western Christian Church in the Middle Ages was the Papacy. Therefore, no study of the Middle Ages in Europe would be complete without giving attention to this central and important institution in the Church.*

*Throughout the history of the Papacy, there were individuals of true greatness and holiness who claimed for the Papacy its rightful role as the spiritual leader of Christendom. There were also times when the Papacy was in the hands of men whose concerns were more for their own power and luxury.*

*The history of the Papacy to the Middle Ages is long and complex, spanning some 1500 years. This unit will examine only some of the different phases in the history of the Papacy and the events and forces that had a shaping influence on it.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the West, the Pope was considered the head of the Christian Church. As well as having considerable power in religious matters, the Pope also had great secular and political power. This was often resented by rulers. Others, including many religious people, were critical of the Pope's involvement in secular affairs.

Over the centuries, some popes had worked hard to make the Papacy a strong state (nation). They believed that all other states should be subject to it. In 1302, Pope Boniface VIII wrote that "He who denies that the secular sword is in the power of Peter does not understand the words of the Lord . . ."

There were others in the Church in the Middle Ages who did not agree with him. There was much that needed to be reformed in the Medieval Church and if the reforms were to be successful, it was the Papacy that needed to show the way. But, critics

argued, if most of the Pope's energies and resources were involved in power struggles and politics, not much would be left for the essential work of caring for the spiritual wellbeing of Christians. Supporters of Papal claims for both secular and clerical power maintained that the two were inseparable. Even up to the late nineteenth century, there has been conflict on this issue.

## BACKGROUND HISTORY OF THE PAPACY

### THE FIRST CENTURIES

During the first centuries of the Christian Era, the Bishop of Rome played an increasingly important role as spiritual guide and director to other dioceses in the Western Roman Empire. Repeatedly, bishops asked Rome for help or for clarification of doctrines. Rome also gave considerable financial help to other Christian communities. (More detail on this development is given in the earlier unit on *The Church of Rome*.)

The term 'Papa' (Pope) was used by many bishops in the early Christian Church. It was not until the fifth or sixth century (there is some disagreement about dates) that the title Pope was used exclusively by the Bishop of Rome.

Other prominent centres in the early years of Christianity were Jerusalem, Antioch, Carthage and Alexandria, and, most importantly, the church in the capital, Constantinople, which laid claims to being the leading church in the Christian world.

Rome had always been regarded as a very important centre for Christianity because both St Peter and St Paul were believed to be martyred there. Also, in 313 C.E., the Emperor Constantine had given the Church in the old capital, Rome, large tracts of land, many buildings and a great deal of money. This helped the Roman Church establish itself on a solid economic base. It set about establishing a strong administrative centre and building or refurbishing buildings to be used as places of worship and learning.

### THE CONSOLIDATION OF ROMAN POWER

In the 7th century, Pope Gelasius had written:

Nobody at any time and for whatever human pretext may haughtily set himself above the office of him who by Christ's order was set above all and everyone, and whom the universal church had always recognised as its head.

Although this principle was asserted by the Pope, it was not universally accepted by other church leaders. In particular the Church in Constantinople.

(See the units, *The Church of Rome* and *The Church of the East and the Church of the West*)

### CONFLICT WITH THE CHURCH IN CONSTANTINOPLE

From its beginnings in the early years of the fourth century C.E., the Eastern Church in Constantinople had asserted its supremacy over all other Christian Churches.

As had been the tradition of the pagan Roman emperors and the emperors after Constantine, the

capital was regarded as the key religious centre of the Empire. So it followed that the Church in Constantinople, the new capital of the Empire, should be considered the most important church in the Christian world, which it was, at least by those in the Eastern part of the Empire. The Roman Church would not accept such a fact. For many years the two churches were at odds with each other over the issue of spiritual authority. The matter was never resolved and finally the two churches chose to go their own way. (See the Unit *The Church of the East and the Church of the West*.)

For the Roman Church, the centuries that followed the important turning point in 313 C.E., were a time when it became increasingly more autonomous and more powerful. This does not imply that there were not times when the Roman Church was under threat or times when it was badly in need of reform. It was not all smooth going. But by the first millennium (1,000 C.E.), the Church in Rome had survived many difficult centuries of wars, invasions, plundering, corruption and mismanagement and was still in a position of power, with extensive resources in both administration and wealth. The fact that it survived at all is remarkable. Despite all the turmoil, it had established a strong tradition for leadership in theological matters and an organisation of religious institutions that catered for the spiritual (and in many cases the physical) needs of the Christians in its care. This is how it came about.

### THE EFFECTS ON THE WESTERN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES OF INVASIONS

#### THE MUSLIM INVASION

The eighth century was a decisive century for the Roman Church. First, Muslim armies began their invasions to spread Islam. As a result, leading Christian cities Carthage, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem were conquered. Though the cities were not destroyed, over the years their Christian populations dwindled; these former Christian cities were no longer the great centres of Christian learning and authority that they had been earlier on. As a



An eighth century mosaic in the basilica of St John Lateran in Rome, showing St Peter giving the pallium (a scarf-like vestment of white wool with red crosses, worn by the Pope) to Pope Leo III shown on Peter's right, and a battle standard to the Emperor Charlemagne on Peter's left.

What meaning do you think this mosaic is meant to convey?

result, it seemed only natural that Rome should assume the role of leader of the Western Christian world.

**SPIRITUAL AND SECULAR POWERS**  
During the reign of Charlemagne, in the early 800s – he ruled what is now modern-day France – the

difficult and troublesome question of who had the right to rule Christendom was raised. (Christendom was the name given to the new Roman Empire of Charlemagne's realm.)

No pope at that stage would dispute Charlemagne's power. But after his death, there was a steady change.

In the ninth century, the popes claimed power over secular rulers with a great measure of success. For example, Pope Nicholas I (858-867), when he crowned the Emperor, gave the Emperor the Sword of State which symbolised that it was the Emperor's sacred duty to be the protector of the Church. Pope John VIII went one step further; he declared that not only should the Pope crown the Emperor but also that he had the right to choose the Emperor.

### THE VIKING AND MAGYAR INVASIONS

The invasions of Europe by the Vikings and Magyars, in the latter part of the ninth century, had a devastating effect on social and political life. The squabbling between the heirs of Charlemagne as to who would control most of the Empire meant that no united force could be organised to confront the barbarian invaders. The invasions had long lasting influences on cities, towns, institutions and the Church. Europe, on the whole, was in chaos. At a meeting of bishops in Rome gloomy feelings were expressed:

The cities are depopulated, the monasteries ruined and burned, the country reduced to solitude. . . . as the first men lived without law or fear of God, abandoned to their passions, so now every man does what seems good in his own eyes, despising laws human and divine and the commands of the Church. The strong oppress the weak; the world is full of violence against the poor and of the plunder of ecclesiastical goods . . . Men devour one another like the fishes in the sea.<sup>1</sup>

At this time, the Papacy came under the control of the aristocracy in Rome. Probably the lowest point in the history of the Papacy was reached during the short pontificate of John XII who was made Pope



*Pope Urban preaching in France*

when he was about eighteen. Even the Romans, who were rarely surprised by excessive behaviour, were shocked.

### THE CONFLICT BETWEEN POPES AND RULERS

From the tenth century onwards, some stability and prosperity returned to Europe. Once again, there was a revival of the idea of the Roman Empire – this time, in the Kingdom of the Eastern Franks, roughly equivalent to modern-day Germany.

Otto the Great revived this idea of Empire and it became known from then on as the Holy Roman Empire (first of the three German Reichs). The Emperor Otto saw the Church was an important element in his plan to bring about order in his lands.

The old conflict between the power of the Church and the power of the secular ruler was once more to become a difficult issue. Though no strong conflict occurred during Otto's reign, the problem came out

into the open when the question of who had the ultimate authority to appoint bishops was to be determined.

### BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

As a result of the breakdown in the social order brought about by centuries of barbarian invasions in the Western Empire, local lords and princes acquired for themselves the power to appoint bishops. This development became known as *lay investiture* of bishops.

At that time, the Church was not strong enough to resist this loss of power. In many instances, the men chosen to be bishops were unsuitable for the task; they were often puppets or lackeys of the prince or lord. Control of bishops' estates brought the lords extra income and power, that's why they fought so hard to keep these appointments in their own hands. Successive popes criticised this practice for many years, but they did not have the power to change the situation.

### POPE GREGORY VII CONFRONTS THE PROBLEM

In 1073, Pope Gregory VII was elected. He was a man of great strength and fierce will ( a friend once described him as 'Holy Satan'). He was determined to bring about the end of lay investiture and reform the administration of the Church. The test case was to be a confrontation with the German Emperor about lay investiture.

When German bishops, under direction from the Emperor Henry IV, would not support Gregory, he responded with a sentence of excommunication and deposition. For a year Henry resisted, but in 1077 the situation in his kingdom had become unstable and he felt he had no choice but to submit to Gregory's demands. The Pope was on his way to Germany when Henry caught up with him. Henry tried to have an audience with Gregory, but the Pontiff left him standing in the courtyard of Countess Mathilda's palace at Canossa, in the snow for three days in beggar's clothes, to test his sincerity.

Henry's repentance however, was short lived. The issue of lay investiture was not resolved until 1122 at the Concordat of Worms when this long standing

dispute ended in a compromise. The Emperor gave up his right to invest (elect) bishops, but he retained control of many other rights over the German church.

Though it would be true to say that much of the history of the Medieval Papacy was taken up with the concerns of the popes to maintain and consolidate the power of the church, the greatest pontiffs were concerned with all aspects of the lives of Christians.

Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) was one such Pope. He was elected Pope at the age of 37. He was intelligent, well educated and indefatigable. His time as Pope was marked by some of the most significant events of the Middle Ages – events in which he played a central role. His vision was to see a united Christendom, free of heresy, free too from the evils that had crept into Church life. He hoped for a Christian Empire that would encompass the Holy Lands in Palestine, ruled in harmony by the Roman Pontiff and Christian princes. It was to achieve these ideals that Innocent encouraged a Fourth Crusade to the Holy Land, advocated the conversion of the Albigensians – first by preachers, then by force – and encouraged the founding of new orders of mendicant preachers – like the Dominicans and Franciscans to minister to the poor and revive Gospel values in the general Church community. It was this ideal of reform and revival that led Innocent to call the Fourth Lateran Council of the Church.

Though all of these projects were not successful, and while Innocent did not live to see the results of what he set in motion, his Pontificate is considered to be one of the most illustrious in Church History.

### THE EROSION OF PAPAL POWER

By the late fourteenth century the authority of the Papal state was increasingly under attack. In 1301, King Philip IV of France sent troops to Rome to arrest Pope Boniface VIII – something that would have been inconceivable in earlier centuries.

Two issues had brought matters to this point. Firstly, the Pope had refused to accept Philip's decision to collect taxes from the French Church. Up until then, the Church had been exempt from most taxation. Secondly, the Pope protested when a

French bishop, accused of treason, was tried in a civil court of law instead of a Church court – which had always been the case in the past. (These two issues had also been points of conflict with other rulers.)

After the death of Boniface, Philip felt powerful enough to bring about the election of a personal friend as pope, who, upon election, chose to live in France. For the next sixty eight years, seven French popes lived at Avignon, in the South of France, in a massive fortress-like palace. From there they ruled the Western Christian Church.

This period of time, known as the Avignon Captivity, had a detrimental effect on the stability of Europe as a whole. The effects were felt not just in the religious sphere.

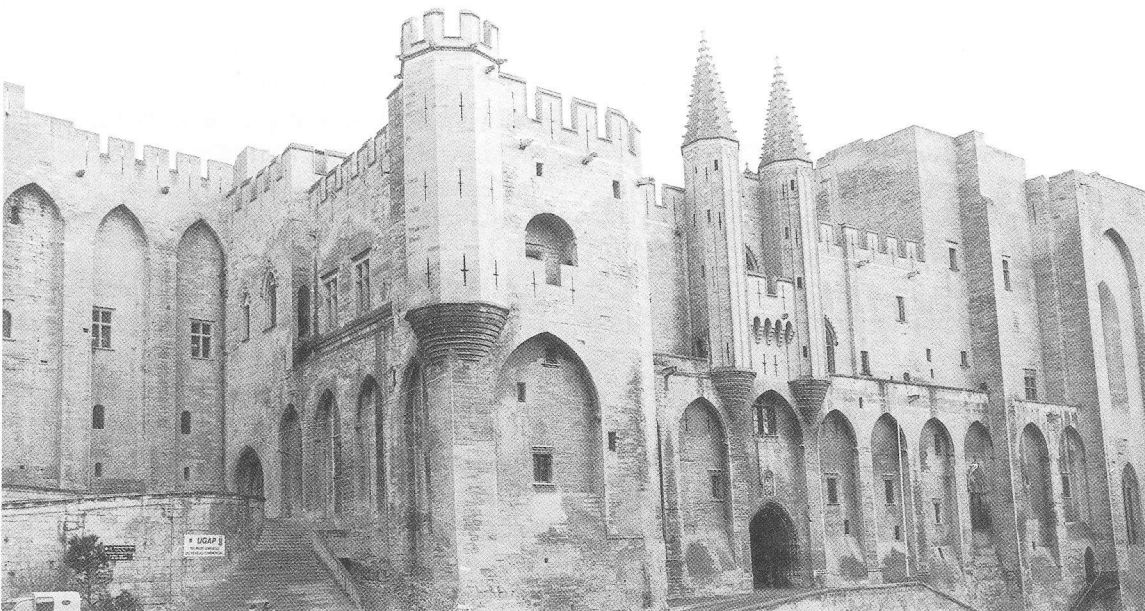
Devout Christians believed that the pope, as successor to Saint Peter, should preside over the Church in Rome. Other nations, especially the English, were concerned at the power wielded by the French king over the popes in Avignon, fearing that this might disadvantage them politically.

### THE GREAT SCHISM – THE CHRISTIAN WORLD IS RULED BY TWO POPES

In 1377, Pope Gregory XI returned from Avignon to Rome. But the problems confronting the papacy did not cease. The next pope, Urban VI, was not acceptable to all the cardinals who had participated in the election. The French cardinals wanted another French pope; the Romans wanted a Roman pope. The intrigues and plots that followed were shameful. For about thirty years, two popes were in office – one in Avignon and one in Rome. One attempt to bring about a solution only managed to elect a third pope.

Finally, at the Council of Constance, (1414-18), after long wrangling and argument, Martin V, a Roman, was elected as the only pope.

This lengthy, distressing period of turmoil and confusion left the Church weakened, with its moral authority in tatters, hardly fit, it would seem, to cope with the enormous changes that were to occur in the centuries to come.



*The Papal Palace in Avignon in France*



Paintings of four Avignon Popes on the walls of a reception room in the Papal Palace in Avignon

**Time Line of Important Events**

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| <p><b>962</b> Otto the Great and the beginning of the Holy Roman Empire</p> <p><b>1054</b> Schism between the Greek and Roman churches</p> <p><b>1059</b> The Eastern Roman Empire is defeated by the Turks</p> <p><b>1077</b> Henry IV of Germany gives in to Pope Gregory VII</p> <p><b>1095</b> Pope Urban II preaches the Crusades at Clermont in France</p> <p><b>1099</b> Jerusalem is captured from the Muslims</p> <p><b>1122</b> The Concordat of Worms in Germany (ends the dispute between the Popes and Kings/ rulers about who had the right to elect bishops, etc.)</p> | <p><b>1177</b> Frederick II of the Holy Roman Empire gives in to the Pope</p> <p><b>1177</b> The Dominicans start preaching</p> <p><b>1187</b> Jerusalem is lost to Saladin, the great Islamic warrior</p> <p><b>1188</b> Beginning of the Third Crusade</p> <p><b>1208</b> The Crusade against the Albigensians in the south of France</p> <p><b>1209</b> The beginning of the Franciscan Order</p> <p><b>1232</b> The beginning of the Papal Inquisition</p> <p><b>1305-1377</b> The Popes in Avignon</p> <p><b>1348</b> The Black Death</p> <p><b>1378-1417</b> The Great Schism</p> |
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