

# CHURCH HISTORY

## The Height and Decline of the Papacy (1073–1517)

By Dr. Jack L. Arnold

### Medieval Church History, part 3

#### I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The period from 1073 to 1517 is the time in history when the Roman Catholic Church held a “death grip” on everything, and rose to its greatest heights as an ecclesiastical organization.
- B. This is also a period in which the papacy freed itself from the secular rule and became the dominate force in European politics and religious life.
- C. This period showed a few glimpses of light, but most of it is a tale of corruption and chaos, and is a great blot on all who call themselves Christians. The corrupt condition of the Roman Catholic Church showed the great need for reformation within the Church.

#### II. THE HEIGHT OF THE PAPACY (1073-1303)

- A. Gregory VII (Hildebrand)
  - 1. *Rise to Power:* For some twenty years before he became pope, Hildebrand was the power behind the papal throne. During this period there were six popes, and Hildebrand influenced the thinking of all of them. Through his efforts, Hildebrand was able to get the popes to reform the papal election procedure. Formerly, popes had been elected by the people of Rome, often under the influence of secular rulers. In Hildebrand’s day, the change was made to election by the college of cardinals, a procedure which is still in effect.
  - 2. *Election to the Papacy:* Hildebrand was very popular with the people, and, upon the death of Pope Alexander II, he was placed into the office of pope by the people while preaching Alexander’s funeral. He was not elected by the cardinals (a papal law he had initiated), but by the people. However, the college of cardinals did put its approval upon the

election. In 1073 Hildebrand assumed the chair of St. Peter under the name of Gregory VII.

3. *Personal Life and Theology:* Gregory (Hildebrand) was a sincere person who had been influenced by the Cluny reform movement within the Roman Catholic Church. He loved God, but was a slave to the concept of the Roman Catholic hierarchical system. Through Gregory a mild revolution came to the Church. Gregory held that, as vicar of Christ and representative of Peter, he could give or take away empires, kingdoms, duchies, marquisates, and the possessions of all men. Everyone on earth, from the emperor down to the humblest peasant, had to acknowledge him. Gregory had the brains, authority, power, tact and administrative ability to make this claim stick. Gregory's favorite reading was *City of God* by Augustine. He sought to establish the kingdom of God on earth through the Roman Catholic Church.
4. *His Reforms:*
  - a. *Ban on clerical marriage:* Gregory was afraid that the clergy and their families would become a religious caste and oppose him. The only way he could get the clergy to give absolute allegiance to him was to ban marriage completely. This he did in 1079.
  - b. *Opposed Simony:* He fought the concept of simony (the buying or selling of religious offices) and was quite successful.
5. *His Fight Against Lay Investiture:* The great test of strength during Gregory's pontificate arose over the choice of the archbishop of Milan. Gregory's opponent was Henry IV, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire — each had a candidate for the office. In 1075 Gregory boldly prohibited lay investiture and summoned Henry IV to Rome as if he were a feudal vassal. Henry refused to go and he persuaded a German Council to depose the pope. The pope in turn threatened excommunication. Henry called the Council of Worms and denounced papal authority. Henry was excommunicated and an anathema pronounced against his subjects. No one could or would have any dealings with Henry, or give him food or shelter, for fear of eternal torments, so great was the terror inspired then by a papal interdict. Ultimately, Henry was forced to make his peace with Gregory. Within a year he hurried across the Alps in the dead of winter with his wife

and child to make his peace with the pontiff at Canossa. Barefooted and dressed as a humble penitent, he was compelled to stand for three days in the courtyard in the snow. On the fourth day the pontiff agreed to receive him. He pled for clemency, confessed his fault, made his humble submission at the feet of the pope, and received absolution. This was a great triumph for the papacy. However, Henry received back his position and power, and was able to drive Gregory VII out of Rome. In the end Henry won the last round. Gregory died in exile and said dejectedly, "I have loved righteousness and hated iniquity, therefore I die in exile."

The papacy ultimately won the investiture struggle. At a Concordat of Worms in 1122, the emperor consented to permit the church to elect bishops and abbots and invest them with spiritual power. While elections were to be held in the presence of the king, he could not use simony or violence. Elected officials of the church were to pledge allegiance to the temporal power.

## B. The Crusades

1. There were six officially organized crusades which were designed to free Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Muslims, who were interfering with Christian pilgrimages and becoming a general menace to Christians. The idea of a crusade was first espoused by Gregory VII, but was carried out by his successors. There was one unofficial crusade, led by Peter the Hermit, an uncouth and unkempt preacher, who worked up the multitudes into a frenzy of enthusiasm. It was soon regarded as a disgrace not to join a crusade. Many thousands of men, women and children, in various unofficial expeditions, set out in 1096 without any preparation, expecting God to provide for them miraculously. Of 275,000 who joined these groups, all either perished of cold or disease, or were scattered. Peter the Hermit fled at the first sign of danger.
2. *First Crusade:* The first official crusade, prompted by Pope Urban II, set out with 300,000 men in August, 1096, going via Constantinople. Tens of thousands perished in the cold uplands of Asia Minor. Rivalries and jealousies also sadly weakened the expedition, but their bravery was unbounded. They reached Jerusalem in 1099. Of those who left Europe only one tenth completed the journey. It is a strange reflection on the spirit of the Crusaders that when they entered the Holy City,

their first action was to massacre the Muslims. The saying among the Crusaders was, “If you can’t kill a Turk, kill a Jew.” The Crusades were often blood baths. This was the only crusade that could be said to be somewhat successful, for it accomplished what it set out to do: it freed Jerusalem from the Seljuk Turks.

3. *The Other Crusades*: There were five other crusades and they were supported by some of the most powerful men in Europe, but they were all miserable failures. The Crusades were a failure, and Jerusalem remained in the hands of the Muslims until 1917 when the English general Allenby captured the Holy City from the Turks.
4. *Motivations for the Crusades*: Most of the people who became part of the Crusades began with a sincere religious motive. However, there were some who joined them for economic and political reasons. There were certainly mixed motives. However, the immorality, pillage and massacre which so often disgraced the movement show that in spite of the great zeal in pursuing their ideal, no true spiritual power had taken possession of them. The final effects were mainly political and social rather than religious.
5. *The Positive Effects of the Crusades*: First, Europe’s kings were busy fighting the Turks rather than one another. Second, while the church directed the energies of Europeans in fighting an external foe, she provided a safety valve which spared her a great deal of internal stress. Third, the Crusades brought the western world into contact with eastern and oriental culture, which helped lay the basis for the Renaissance.

### C. The Inquisition

1. The Inquisition was instituted by Gregory IX (1227-1241). It was designed to inquire into the spread of heresy, and to call before its tribunals Catholics suspected of heresy with a view of securing their repentance. The program was launched merely to keep the faithful in line, not to obtain the conversion of Jews and Muslims.
2. The Inquisition became a necessity because of the rapidly increasing groups in Europe that were crying for reform within the Roman Catholic Church. The divisive groups had to be checked because they were threatening the existence of the Roman Catholic Church.

3. In the Inquisition the secular rulers, influenced by the Church leaders, actually administered the trial, torture and killing of unrepentant persons. The Roman Church, therefore, has not been willing to take the blame for the excesses which history records. However, the Roman Catholic Church must take the blame, for they originated the Inquisition.
  4. The Inquisition was a big deterrent to all who would rise up against the papacy. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the Reformation did not come sooner.
- D. *Monasticism*: Monasticism was one of the forces that gave the Roman Catholic Church such power in the Middle Ages. The monks influenced the thinking of all Europe because they were the educated people.
- E. *Scholasticism*: It was the sum of the teachings and methods of the prominent western philosophers most widely accepted during the Middle Ages. It constituted a harmonization of philosophy and theology in one system for the purpose of the rational demonstration of theological truth. The Scholastics sought certainty of the truth and salvation by way of knowledge and reason. The ninth to the twelfth centuries mark the formative period of Scholasticism, the thirteenth century the height, and the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a period of decline. Anselm and Abelard are usually thought of as cofounders, Hugo and Peter Lombard as important representatives along the way, Thomas Aquinas as representing the movement at its height, and Duns Scotus and William of Ockam as typical writers during the period of decline.

### III. THE DECLINE OF THE PAPACY (1305-1517)

- A. *Introduction*: The papacy began to decline with Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303). Boniface insisted upon ridiculous claims over all temporal rulers and said, "We declare, state, define and pronounce that for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pope is altogether necessary for salvation." The very arrogance of these papal claims, however, irritated many rulers and provoked violent reactions. Boniface was captured by Philip the Fair of France, and he was so badly treated that he died within a month. Many in the secular and religious world were fed up with papal pride and church corruption. There was stirring for either the reform of the Roman Church, or the complete overthrow of it.

- B. *The Rise of Nationalism*: There was a rise of national monarchs and a decline of feudalism, which resulted in a spirit of nationalism and increased loyalty of the people to their secular rulers. The Roman Catholic Church demanded supra-national loyalty, which was being threatened by nationalism. Besides this, rulers and people began to want to share in the immense wealth of the Roman Catholic Church.
- C. *Opposition to the Inquisition*: The rigid enforcement of doctrine and practice, especially by means of the Inquisition, stirred up opposition and dissent.
- D. *Wealth of the Roman Catholic Church*: In order for the Church to maintain her wealthy status and maintain the hierarchy, it resorted to all kinds of devious means of obtaining money. The most notorious of these was the selling of indulgences, which was the penance of paying of money to shorten ones' time of suffering in purgatory.
- E. *Immorality of the Clergy*: There was increasing moral laxity among churchmen, especially in the 15th century.
- F. *Opposition to the Crusades*: Many felt the Crusades were morally wrong. Also, the Crusades introduced many to another kind of life, which in turn hurt the iron grip the Roman Catholic Church had on the people of Europe.
- G. *The Renaissance*: The word "renaissance" means "rebirth," and designates the revival of Latin and Greek literature and art which took place at the end of the medieval period and the beginning of the modern age. The Renaissance marked the rise of the middle class with new wealth, which they commonly chose to spend on art, literature, education and the like, rather than on the church. The Renaissance was not a religious movement, but it prepared the way for the Reformers by opening men's minds and breaking the shackles imposed for centuries by the church hierarchy. There was a revival of learning, a spirit of adventure, enterprise, geographical discovery, and a renewal of the science of philosophy. The dry and sterile word-spinning of Scholasticism was replaced by the methods of genuine science with its new and precious discoveries. Philosophy, too, was entering on a new era. Great men flourished such as Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci. The men of learning during this time were called humanists, and some were also Christians, such as Savonarola (1452-1498), John Colet (1466-1513) and Erasmus (1467-1536). The new spirit of independent inquiry led to a deadly blow to the authoritative system that the papacy represented.

- H. *The Babylonian Captivity (1305-1377)*: This was a period of approximately seventy years when the pope ruled from Avignon in Southern France. It was a time when the pope was, for all practical purposes, a prisoner of the French national interests. The situation in Rome in the long absence of the pope became dangerous for the Roman Catholic Church politically and religiously. Great efforts were made by Roman citizens and other influential people to get the pope back, and in 1377 Gregory IX returned from the long exile.
- I. *The Papal Schism (1378-1417)*: On the death of Pope Gregory in 1379, Urban VI, an Italian, was elected. The French cardinals elected a fellow countryman, Clement VII, who returned to Avignon. Some nations supported the pope at Avignon. some the one at Rome. When the Council of Pisa in 1409 tried to settle the problem, it succeeded only in electing a third pope. So, for several years there were three popes anathematizing and excommunicating one another. Christendom was utterly confused. So serious was this schism that the power of Rome was never the same again.
- J. *Conclusion*: The declining years of the hierarchy was a time of religious and political corruption and chaos. There was a great need for reform within the Roman Catholic Church, but how and where would this be accomplished? God was preparing the world for the Reformation.