Part 1

STRUCTURES

By far the most straightforward way to begin a thematic overview of the Christianity of medieval Western Europe is to approach it through its structures, the organisational systems and mechanisms that allowed it to function and gave it a kind of unity and coherence. It is an approach legitimated by a long tradition of historical scholarship, which has indeed underpinned much of what might be considered ‘old-fashioned’ ecclesiastical history – the history that concentrates on the institutional Church rather than the religion’s more social manifestations and impact. Such history is, however, ‘old-fashioned’ only in the sense that it is a long established tradition: it remains a valid and valuable strand of scholarship, augmented and enhanced by integrating recent evolutions, but neither superseded nor replaced.

The structures provide a necessary background and context for much of the subsequent volume. Here, they are addressed in terms of territorial units, personnel, and the validating ideas underpinning some of those components, which might at times be considered an ideology.

While the focus on the structures and personnel of the Church (for the structures could not work without the people) provides an easy starting point, it is also a somewhat risky one. The structures treated here are essentially practical – the concrete components of a functioning Church organised in a hierarchy of territorial units (for the ‘secular’ Church) and coherent networks (for the ‘regulars’); both patterns being united into a single bureaucratic entity under papal direction. In this context, the use of terms such as ‘papal monarchy’, and the much-repeated dictum that ‘The medieval church was a state’ (derived from the eminent legal historian F. W. Maitland),¹ help to build preconceptions often shaped and distorted through a lens affected by equating post-Reformation Roman Catholicism with its medieval precursor, by an overemphasis on expectations of bureaucratic efficiency (heightened by myths of inquisition), and by historiographical traditions that (at least in Anglophone scholarship) often have an inherited anti-Catholic (and specifically anti-papal) bias.

That last element has significantly declined in recent decades, but still shapes some perceptions. The monstrosity has become less monstrous, but its ghost is not yet exorcised. Medieval Christianity was indeed an organised religion, with all that that entailed, but it was also a strikingly and surprisingly disorganised religion, very much a continual experiment in organisation and understanding. The most basic of practical considerations – communications, compliance, people – precluded the centralised bureaucratic monolith sometimes associated with ideas of papal monarchy, but an investigation of structures almost automatically invites a top-down approach, fitting components into an overarching structure.
dependent – no matter how insecurely – on its earthly head. Investigation of the reality must also incorporate a bottom-up perspective, the relative impotence of the overarching structures forcing them to invite and encourage participation, accept decentralisation and localism, and respond to and accommodate pressures and demands from lower down the system.

That the unified Western Church of these centuries was built around the papacy places that institution at the heart of the history, mainly because it was such a formative influence both on ideas and practice. Nevertheless, its claims to authority were often contested and limited: the papal monarchy could not be an absolute monarchy. Subsidiary units and authorities (most importantly, bishops and priests, bishoprics and parishes) were needed to create the Church in the localities and provide administrative links to the centre, a system that required collaboration and collusion if it was to work. In combination, some kind of unity resulted, but the tensions between centre and locality – whether the centre was Rome or the local cathedral, the locality the diocese or the parish – also introduced a balance of forces and loyalties that played against each other, and in the process shaped the reality of how the Church’s practical authority was perceived and experienced.

The structures did not run on automatic. They can be objectified as ‘the papacy’, ‘the diocese’, ‘the parish’, and so on, but each of these terms is, in reality, shorthand for a complex human organism – individual popes and bishops, their fellow administrators and employed officials, and the great body of Christians whose lives were shaped by the structures but who might not be as compliant as desired. For organisational and administrative purposes, the key personnel were the clergy, the men who supervised many of the core spiritual and practical functions of the faith. A division emphasised, reinforced and blurred across the late medieval centuries between the two main groups of clergy – the seculars (‘within the world’) and regulars (‘under a rule’) – requires that each be considered separately. The two groups were often in opposition and competition across the period, but it is also important to recognise their frequent symbiosis and functional overlap, especially significant in their relations with the laity, as guides and governors.

Here, though, there is an obvious absence in the shape of this section: the glaring lack of a chapter specifically on ‘the laity’. To omit the overwhelming majority of the medieval Catholic population from direct attention may seem perverse. Laypeople were, after all, fundamental, essential, to the structures: the whole Church was built on them, and for them. They were the majority of those meant to be ‘the believers’; the majority of those supposedly seeking salvation; and the ones who were being directed, goaded, bullied, enticed into compliance with the religious and social norms established by the clergy in collaboration with the secular rulers. They were also the ones whose compliance was basic to the shape of medieval Catholic practice, and whose concerns for their own salvation helped to shape both doctrine and practice. In a very real sense, medieval Catholicism was a demand-led religion. It was lay anxiety about the afterlife that finally forced the theologians to legitimate the doctrine of purgatory, and which subsequently made it one of the most significant factors in religious practice. It was the laity who were usually the first to recognise a saint, or a holy site. It was mainly the laity who funded the Church, certainly at its lowest level. Such lay activity and initiative was not always approved or encouraged – there were numerous contests about the holiness of a putative saint and the validity of miracles said to occur at supposedly holy sites – but the laity were always a force to the reckoned with, and on occasion irresistible.

The Church and religion that the laity constructed for themselves reflected their own concerns: building from the bottom up, they created structures to meet their own needs,
fitting into a general pattern often without fully subscribing to it. In some respects, they created their own Church in parallel with the authorised version, through their own investment and organisations. The Christianity they constructed, in its relationships with the ideas of the faith, and with the clergy and other authorities who administered it, was both local and variable. It rested on local units – mainly parish and guild, sometimes city and lordship – but was in its turn shaped by integration into broader ecclesiastical and social units. It reflected local contexts and opportunities. Itself evolving, and responding to contemporary evolutions within the clericalised Church, such lay involvement becomes increasingly visible over time, in ways that suggest increasing lay religious autonomy and influence within the Church. However, while much is written about ‘lay religion’, of ‘popular religion’ (the latter an especially contested term), the sheer complexity and variety of this lay involvement makes a single chapter-length summary impractical – and if actually limited to a chapter, almost meaningless. The laity are not in this section explicitly, because implicitly they are everywhere in the volume: as the people whom the administrative and jurisdictional structures were meant to organise and oversee; as the addressees and respondents to the complex of doctrinal and social ideas and expectations built up by theologians, canon lawyers, and other intellectuals; as the ones chiefly engaged in the practices of the religion; as the main actors in the social world that the religion sought to shape and direct.

Notes


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Writing several years after the conclusion of World War I, the American medievalist A. C. Krey responded to recent conjecture and debate over the League of Nations and the extent of its sovereignty by identifying what he saw as a more or less similar example of international order in the past: that of medieval Christendom. By the era of Pope Innocent III (1198–1216), Krey observed,

the Church with the papacy at its head had become an international state. It had everything that a state has – and more. It could raise funds by direct taxation and raise armies equally directly. It could bring offenders to the courts of justice, and it had the means of executing its judgments. It applied its laws equally to peasant and king and it executed judgments against both. It controlled education, controlled the agencies of publicity, and controlled the courts. The social cares of charity and public health were in its hands. And on top of all this, it wielded the awful power of eternal life or death. Never in history have the moral forces of so vast a society been so thoroughly concentrated and so effective. As an experiment in practical idealism, it is still without equal.¹

Krey’s vision of what historians call the ‘papal monarchy’ probably tells us more about his own moment in time than the days of Innocent III, about early twentieth-century hopes for peace following the trauma of the First World War than papal governance in the thirteenth century. Yet the idea of Christendom continued and still continues to resonate among scholars of the Middle Ages, not to mention philosophers, social scientists, politicians, and anyone else seeking the premodern roots of modern European civilization. To simplify an argument made many times over, before Europe, there was Latin or Western Christendom, a community of Christian kingdoms and peoples with a shared religious tradition. And Christendom could not be imagined without the unifying ideals and bureaucratic mechanisms of the Roman papacy.²

There are good reasons for such evaluations of papal leadership over the medieval societies of Western European; above all during the so-called central or high Middle Ages.³ Popes vied with emperors, sometimes successfully, for supremacy over the Christian world and also to assert their rights of direct lordship over the Papal States on the Italian peninsula. To a considerable extent, they determined norms of religious belief and practice for women and men, the rich and poor, the mighty and humble. They oversaw the targeting and suppression of heresy, and set crusading armies in motion. Canon lawyers pushed at the limits of papal jurisdiction, including the pope’s position as the ‘ordinary judge’ for ecclesiastical disputes
and his ‘fullness of power’ (*plenitudo potestatis*) over the Church and its offices. As a source of clerical privileges and a court of final appeals, the Roman curia formed an irresistible center of gravity for ecclesiastical business. Once again, all roads led to Rome (or wherever the popes happened to be at any given time), bringing litigants seeking papal intervention, clerics petitioning for benefices, and favor-seekers asking for special consideration from the Apostolic See.

Much like Krey, however, historians sometimes inflate the level of ideological influence and direct institutional power wielded by the medieval popes of Rome, who did not necessarily possess the governmental means to ‘control’ the legal, political, social, and spiritual life of Western Europe, even if they had wanted to do so. As we will see, applying the Church’s laws to emperors, kings, and other secular rulers proved especially difficult. With regard to the pope’s direct oversight of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the term ‘papal monarchy’ is somewhat misleading. Although the bishop of Rome held a unique position, his office did not represent the sole source of authority in the Church. Other bishops, after all, possessed a ‘part of the responsibility’ (*pars sollicitudinis*) for the governing of the Church, complementing the pope’s ‘fullness of power’. The papacy frequently acted in deliberation with others, as seen during the First (1123), Second (1139), Third (1179), and Fourth (1215) Lateran Councils. In addition, the College of Cardinals – responsible for electing popes after the mid-eleventh century – functioned as an important legislative body of sorts, complementing and sometimes contesting papal authority. The papal monarchy largely worked not because popes unilaterally controlled others, but because Christian Europeans looked to the papacy for spiritual guidance, privileges, and protections when it suited their needs. As the other essays in this volume make amply clear, the popes of Rome represented only one force among many shaping Western Christianity during the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries.

With that caveat in mind, this essay examines the significance of the medieval papacy in Western Christianity, highlighting the fact that the Roman popes possessed a unique claim not just over Christendom, but also over meaning in history itself. That is to say, the articulation of papal sovereignty involved a particular interpretation of Christian history, one evident in representations of the pope’s pastoral calling, his office’s legal prerogatives, and even Rome’s apocalyptic destiny. In their own historical memory, Western Christians imagined the bishop of Rome to be the direct heir to Saint Peter and his status as the ‘Vicar of Christ’ (*vicarius Christi*). The pope’s preeminence in matters of doctrine and sacramental orthodoxy rested upon this simple, compelling, and pervasive view of a past event – Christ had delegated leadership of the Church to Peter (Matthew 16:18–19), and Peter had passed that position down to his successors, the bishops of Rome, forming an unbroken chain of apostolic succession. Due to historical circumstances and developments, popes also possessed the ultimate rights to determine the fate of empire, even to the extent of deposing emperors. When they called for crusades, they did so to ‘restore’ Christian lands seized by infidels, and when they dispatched missionaries, they sought to fulfill Christ’s prediction that the Gospel would be preached among all peoples before the end of time. Christendom under papal leadership thereby occupied not just a location in space, but also a place in time.

Of course, as in every other arena of the Western Christian tradition, popes did not enjoy their supremacy over history without near constant competition and criticism. The supporters of kings and emperors offered their own interpretations of history, prioritizing the power of secular rulers as God’s agents. Remembering the past, Christians also recalled the Primitive Church, when the Apostles and other faithful lived in simplicity and poverty. It did not take
a wild leap of imagination for contemporaries to assert that the present-day papacy had diverged from that ideal, regardless of the reasons why. Looking into the future, some Christians envisioned a time when the popes of Rome might return to the apostolic fervor of the early Church, shepherding the Lord’s people through the tribulations of the apocalypse, abandoning the worldly pomp and possessions they had accrued during the ages since Christ. Critics as well as supporters of the papacy recognized the terrain of history and memory as a site for the elaboration of papal authority over the Western Church. Indeed, by the end of the Middle Ages, such contests over historical meaning contributed to the overwhelming of Christendom, permanently reconfiguring the papacy’s position in European religious life.7

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In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus Christ speaks to his disciple Peter and says:

You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. WHATSOEVER you bind upon earth, it will be bound also in heaven, and whatsoever you loose upon earth, it will be loosed also in heaven.

(Matthew 16:18–19)

At another point, he indicates something similar to all of the Apostles (Matthew 18:18), but in the Gospel of John he again addresses Peter alone, instructing him to ‘Feed my sheep’ (John 21:17). Like any such passages from Scripture, the meaning of these particular words remain open to a variety of interpretations, but only one concerns us here: the insistence, dating back to the second and third centuries, that this moment marked the origin of the ‘Petrine’ commission, when the Lord left the keys to heaven – the power to ‘loosen and bind’ – to Saint Peter and his successors, the popes of Rome.8

In Bernard of Clairvaux’s work On Consideration, dedicated to his former student, Pope Eugene III (1143–1153), the charismatic Cistercian monk forcefully elaborated what the Petrine commission meant for Eugene’s office: ‘Others are called to share part of the responsibility for souls’, he declared, ‘but you are called to the fullness of power’. Peter had revealed himself as the Vicar of Christ when he walked on the many waters of the storm-tossed sea beside the Lord (Matthew 14:29). The ‘many waters’, Bernard explained to Eugene, ‘signifies “many peoples”’. Thus, although each of the others has his own ship, to you is entrusted the greatest ship of all, made from all others, the universal Church which is spread throughout the whole world’. Turning to the Gospel of Luke, Bernard also insisted that the pope possessed both the ‘spiritual’ and ‘material’ swords (Luke 22:38), symbolizing priestly and temporal authority. Although popes did not wield the material sword directly, they delegated that earthly responsibility to emperors and princes, revealing the universal latitude of their commission to safeguard God’s Church. ‘It is a watchtower’, Bernard wrote about the papal throne, ‘from it, you oversee everything though the office of your episcopacy. Why should you not be placed on high where you can see everything, you who have been appointed watchman over all?’9

Bernard, who lived during the so-called ‘renaissance of the twelfth century’, an era of dynamic cultural change and expansionary growth in Christian government, both secular and ecclesiastical, would have been shocked to see the condition of the Roman papacy just over a century beforehand. Certainly, during the earlier medieval centuries, popes such as Leo I (440–461) and Nicholas I (858–867) had embodied a strong form of papal primacy,
acting as Saint Peter’s successors in far-reaching ways, such as when Leo intervened in the Christological debates at the Council of Chalcedon (451), or when Nicholas confronted the rulers of Constantinople during the Photian Schism. Yet only a few generations before Bernard’s time, popes remained local figures for all intents and purposes. Although they never stopped claiming universal preeminence, during the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, the bishops of Rome held their office largely at the sufferance of the city’s aristocratic families and factions, or as close allies of the German kings who claimed Roman imperial power and lordship over Italy. Exalted in theory, the papacy’s influence remained restricted to Rome’s immediate environs, and sometimes barely made its presence felt there – hardly the position of a ‘watchman’ overlooking all.

What had changed? Starting in the middle of the eleventh century, the papacy experienced the beginning of profound alterations that would ultimately transform its role in the governance of the Western Church. Scholars typically describe this epoch as one of reform, referring to the ‘Roman reform movement’ or ‘reform papacy’. In this context, reform signaled an overall commitment to reordering the relationship between the Church and the world; above all where clerical – not lay – rights over ecclesiastical offices and properties were concerned. Among other goals, reformers sought to ‘purify’ the clergy, targeting commonplace habits of clerical life – such as priests who married or carried weapons – as sources of pollution and corruption, standing in the way of truly observing the apostolic life. These calls for change began on a local level, often in monastic settings. Starting with Pope Leo IX (1049–1054) and his circle of supporters, however, mostly outsiders rather than native Romans, those we now call reformers began to leverage the prestige and influence of the papacy to achieve clerical reform throughout the Western Church. Against opposition from Rome’s elite families, they secured control of papal elections – restricting participation in them to the cardinal bishops and later priests – and firmly established the papal office as the bulwark of the reformist impulses reshaping Christian communities around Europe.

Although not inevitable, the dynamics of the reform movement generated open conflict between the papacy and the Salian dynasty, the claimant to Roman imperial power. Famously, Pope Gregory VII (1073–1085) contested the traditional right of emperors to ‘invest’ bishops with the symbols of their sacred office, openly clashing with Henry IV (1056–1106) during the so-called Investiture Conflict. Gregory died in exile, driven from Rome by Henry, but the reformist goals he supported did not die with him. Years later, Pope Urban II (1088–1099) demonstrated the powerful appeal of his office, calling for Christians to take up the cross and march to Jerusalem, freeing it from Islamic rule, an armed movement known as the First Crusade. His successors, including Paschal II (1099–1118), continued the struggle over investiture with Emperor Henry V (1099–1125), while finding points of accommodation with other kings and princes over the control of clerical offices and liberties. Eventually, the empire and papacy declared an effective truce, the so-called Concordat of Worms (1122), which limited the rights of investiture to the clergy, although kings, emperors, and other secular powers still retained considerable influence over ecclesiastical appointments and received oaths of allegiance from churchmen for the ‘temporalities’ attached to their spiritual positions.

During this same era, similar to other ruling bodies around Europe, the machinery of papal governance experienced rapid and profound changes. Emerging from the organization of the pope’s household, the Roman curia began to develop three distinct areas of operation: the ‘chamber’, handling finances; the ‘chapel’, overseeing the papacy’s liturgical responsibilities; and the ‘chancery’, producing and preserving documents. The papal archives began...
to maintain more thorough records of papal letters, decretals, and sources of revenue, including the so-called census, payments made by religious communities for special exemptions and protections granted by Rome. Sitting together in ‘consistory’, popes and cardinals heard legal disputes and addressed other matters of clerical business, forming a ‘new Roman senate’, as contemporaries sometimes called them. With growing frequency, popes dispatched legates across Western Christendom, empowered to negotiate on Rome’s behalf with secular rulers and churchmen. Such legates often did the ‘heavy lifting’ of papal policy on the ground, presiding over local reform councils, preaching for crusades, enforcing excommunications and interdicts, collecting money owed to the Apostolic See, and adjudicating disputes between clergy.13

All of these events and developments are well known. Not always appreciated are some of the ways that the advocates for papal leadership over Christendom invoked the past to substantiate their claims in the present. One can witness this historical imagination in a variety of situations and sources from the earliest days of the papal reform, including a renewed emphasis on the significance of Rome as the site of Peter and Paul’s martyrdom, the burial place of those Apostles’ sacred remains. During the Investiture Controversy, Gregory VII recalled the previous judgments of popes against secular rulers, such as when Pope Zachary (741–752) removed the last Merovingian king from office and sanctioned Pippin’s coronation, inaugurating the Carolinian dynasty. Or, in the sermons attributed to Pope Urban II at Clermont when he launched the First Crusade, the pope spoke about the biblical past of the Holy Land, its conquest by the ‘Saracens’, and the rightful responsibility of Western Christians to liberate Jerusalem.

Memory also shaped the contours of canon law. From the beginning, the supporters of reform had identified law as a critical source of support for their drive to restructure the ecclesiastical hierarchy and its relationship to the world. Some of those legal authorities were in fact forgeries, although not recognized as such as the time, often dating from centuries after the situations they purported to describe. Without a doubt, the ‘Donation of Constantine’ represented the most famous among them, written some time in the later eighth century, but supposedly recording events from the fourth. This document described a series of events that feature not just in legal texts, but also in chronicles, papal letters, and polemical works of political propaganda. It claimed that Pope Sylvester (314–335) personally baptized Constantine I (306–337), the first Roman emperor to embrace Christianity, thereby curing him of his leprosy. Out of gratitude, Constantine bestowed riches and property upon Pope Sylvester and his successors, endowing them with imperial regalia, recognizing Rome as the chief see of the ancient world, and surrendering the power of empire to the pope in the Western Roman world before moving his capital to the newly founded Constantinople. None of this actually happened, which makes the pervasive recollection of those events all the more striking.14

In the mid-twelfth century, Gratian’s creation of the Decretum (c. 1140) revolutionized the ‘science’ of canon law, and gave the papal monarchy one its most enduring resources, a repository of patristic sources, conciliar decisions, and papal decretals (i.e. authoritative legal decisions) that reinforced Rome’s centrality as the ‘mother and head of all churches’. In its pages, one can locate the pronouncements of popes such as Leo I or Nicholas I, declaring the superiority of sacerdotal authority over the secular and the ultimate rights of the pope as judge over the clerical hierarchy. For sound reasons, historians find it difficult to overstate the Decretum’s impact on the legal, intellectual, and administrative parameters of the Roman Church. Beyond the book’s direct contributions to papal authority, the legal
tome reinforced a basic theology of history – one dating back to the patristic era – that the human community moved through time in stages marked by changes in God’s law, from the era of natural law, to the written Jewish law, to the law of the Gospel. Along with the priesthood and the sacraments, the Church had superseded the Synagogue with the Incarnation of Christ, as the Jewish carnal ‘letter’ yielded to the higher Christian ‘spirit’. That mystical and juridical body of the Church would endure until the end of time, under its head, the pope of Rome.15

These claims did not pass uncontested, nor did the papacy easily translate such compelling ideas into action. Pope Innocent II (1130–1143), for example, faced a protracted schism in the papal office after his contested election, abandoning Rome to the anti-pope Anacletus II. Although many of Europe’s secular rulers backed Innocent, the local Roman aristocracy supported Anacletus, keeping Innocent more or less out of the city until his rival died in 1138. A few years later, marching against the Normans in southern Italy, Innocent experienced a humiliating military defeat and captivity before his own demise (Leo IX had suffered a similar fate in 1053). His successors, including Eugene III, confronted another challenge to their position in the form of the Roman commune; an uprising that tried to establish a civil government in Rome, denying the pope’s temporal rights over the city’s offices, properties, and revenues. One of the commune’s outspoken leaders, Arnold of Brescia, turned the papacy’s pastoral claims against it, declaring that Eugene was not what he professed to be – an apostolic man and shepherd of souls – but a man of blood who maintained his authority by fire and sword, a tormentor of churches and oppressor of the innocent, who did nothing in the world save gratify his flesh and empty other men’s coffers to fill his own.16

During the strong imperial reign of the Hohenstaufen monarch Frederick I (1152–1190), Popes Hadrian IV (1154–1159) and Alexander III (1159–1181) openly struggled against the emperor to assert their position, dealing with a series of anti-popes and forging alliances with other European powers, including the northern Italian cities that actively resisted Frederick’s rule. Emperors, armed with their own legal tradition (that of Roman civil law), claimed their own historical rights and projected their own future destinies, including that of the ‘Last World Emperor’, an imperial ruler who would defeat the enemies of the Church, convert non-believers, and pacify the world before the coming of Antichrist.

The dramatic growth of papal government in the twelfth century aroused complaints even among the papacy’s sympathetic supporters. Bernard of Clairvaux leavened his praise for the pope’s universal authority with sharp criticism of the Roman Church’s entanglements in worldly things: ‘Clearly your power is over sin and not property’, he reminded Pope Eugene III, ‘since it is because of sin that you have received the keys of the heavenly kingdom.’ Bernard also complained about increasingly elaborate papal dress and ceremonies, partly inspired by descriptions of the imperial regalia in the ‘Donation of Constantine’. As the Cistercian monk scolded Pope Eugene, ‘In this finery, you are the successor not of Peter, but of Constantine’.17 Bernard’s contemporary, the German canon Gerhoh of Reichenberg, expressed his own disappointment with the condition of the papacy, which, he believed, had lost the earlier spirit of reform. In one tract On the Four Watches of the Night (c. 1169), describing Christ’s appearance before the Apostles on the storm-tossed sea (a scene invoked by Bernard of Clairvaux), Gerhoh presented the history of the Church as a series of trials for the faithful: first, at the hands of pagans; second, heretics; and third, corrupt clergy. Presently, during

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the fourth watch, the Church confronted those who sought to rob it of its liberty through their avarice, signaling the imminence of Antichrist. In the Gospel, Peter walks on the water beside Christ, but begins to sink beneath the waves, revealing the failures of the present-day Roman Church to confront its woes. And yet, Gerhoh continued, Christ holds out his hand to Peter and rescues him, showing that the Lord would not abandon the pope of Rome and the faithful in their time of need, promising them a future time of rest and peace.18

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Regardless of such criticisms and setbacks, heading into the thirteenth century the overall trajectory of the papal monarchy remained ascendant. In the hands of Innocent III, the pope’s status as the Vicar of Christ assumed an unprecedented richness of theological and historical expression. In a number of sermons commemorating his election as pope, Innocent emphasized his office’s universal responsibility to govern the ‘whole world’, based on the pope’s ‘fullness of power’. As pope, he earned a reputation for sitting in consistory daily with the cardinals, adjudicating cases directly. Although he did not always control their outcomes, Innocent declared crusades – a lot of them – on Christendom’s various frontiers, and also within the boundaries of the Western Church against so-called ‘Cathar’ heretics. During a dispute between rival German claimants for the imperial crown, he celebrated the pope’s ultimate status as both priest and king, like the biblical figure of Melchisidek (Genesis 14:18), who foreshadowed Jesus Christ. To be clear, Innocent did not intend to rule as an emperor – his sacerdotal office remained a spiritual and pastoral one. Nevertheless, like the light of the sun and the moon, the power of the pope shone brighter than that of earthly rulers. In 1215, demonstrating his unrivaled leadership over Western Christendom, Innocent convened the Fourth Lateran Council, assembling over 400 bishops, 900 abbots and priors, and scores of other clerics, along with representatives of secular powers from around Western Europe and crusader-held territories in the Eastern Mediterranean. The council’s canons offered a template for an ideal, properly ordered Christian society, enlivened with apostolic spirit, mobilized against heresy, directed toward the recovery of Jerusalem, operating under the pastoral leadership of the Roman papacy for the salvation of all.19

Evoking the agency of his office, Innocent frequently quoted Jeremiah 1:10, God’s instructions, ‘I have set you this day over the nations, and over the kingdoms, to root up and pull down, to waste and to destroy, to build and to plant’. He and his thirteenth-century successors tried to realize this maximalist vision of papal primacy in countless ways, contributing to the vitality of the Western Church (e.g. by supporting the rapid spread of the mendicant orders) and creating new cleavages in it (such as the resentment caused among the secular clergy by those same mendicants). Canon law, among other areas of support, continued to provide an arena for the formulation of papal sovereignty. In 1234, Pope Gregory IX (1227–1241) authorized another legal collection, the *Five Books of Decretals*, which included many of Innocent III’s strongly worded statements of papal primacy. One should immediately add, however, that canon lawyers – whether commenting upon the *Decretum* or the *Decretals* – did not always agree upon the precise extent and limits of the pope’s authority. During their discussions and debates, some lawyers invoked the Roman Church’s past transferral of imperial dignity from unworthy to worthy bearers, some speculated about the historical origins of the priesthood before kingship, and some emphasized the pope’s historical claim to empire based on Constantine’s donation to Sylvester. Others, by contrast, continued to stress the independent nature of secular power, derived directly from God and
not contingent upon papal intervention. Regardless, in the canonistic tradition, the figure of the pope occupied an unrivaled position of authority over Western Christians. 

Trained as a canon lawyer, Innocent IV (1243–1254) composed his own commentary on the Decretals, amplifying the legal parameters of the pope’s fullness of power over spiritual and – in extraordinary circumstances – temporal affairs. As he declared at one point, ‘we do rightly believe that the pope is the Vicar of Christ, who holds power not just over Christians but also all infidels, since Christ holds power over all’. Over the course of his papacy, Innocent acted upon this claim directly and dramatically, calling for further crusades, corresponding with Muslim rulers about the truth of the Gospel, and sending Christian envoys to the new superpower of the age, the Mongol Empire. He also confronted the re-emergence of strong imperial power under the Hohenstaufen ruler Frederick II (1220–1250), already a source of trouble for Gregory IX. This situation came to a head after Innocent fled from Italy and called for a general council to meet at Lyons in 1245. During its deliberations, he deposed Frederick and stripped him of all his titles, calling for the German princes to elect a new king and emperor, a controversial move demonstrating the pope’s meaningful ability to intervene in European politics at the highest level. Justifying this act, Innocent and his supporters again stressed the pope’s unique role in history as Christ’s vicar, acting as the new Melchisidek, possessing both the ‘spiritual and material swords’, deciding whom was worthy to wield the latter.

Not surprisingly, while Frederick and his partisans did not deny the pope’s spiritual preeminence and power over sin, they refuted such claims, pointing back to the simplicity and poverty of the early Church as a benchmark to measure the merits of contemporary popes. A short tract titled On the Correction of the Church, written in Germany by a Dominican named Arnold around 1248, picked up precisely on this theme. Looking at the world around him, Arnold saw corruption and decadence in the Church, a failure of its pastoral mission to care for the poor. He expressed absolutely no doubt about the source of the current problems among Christians, laying the blame upon ‘Innocent IV and all of his members’. Looking into the future, inspired by divine revelation, Arnold also realized that God intended to renew and restore his Church as the sixth age of history drew to a close, promising a new era of justice and peace, when the Dominicans, acting as just pastors, would freely administer to the poor from the ecclesiastical goods given to them by the Lord. After receiving this heavenly insight, Arnold declared, he rushed to see the ‘most serene emperor, the principal defender of the Church’, who greeted this news with great joy, ‘perceiving the Church to be visited by such a grand prophecy of salvation’. A few years later, a Franciscan named Gerard of Borgo San Donnino, inspired by the apocalyptic writings of the twelfth-century abbot Joachim of Fiore, declared that the present-day sacraments and offices of the ‘carnal’ Roman Church would soon cease to matter entirely. In the coming age of the Holy Spirit, the ‘barefoot’ friars would form the spiritual vanguard of the faithful. Although Gerard wound up in prison, his works condemned by a papal commission, his subversive ideas would continue to influence Rome’s future opponents and critics.

Leaving aside apocalypticism, thirteenth-century clergy and monks showed increasing bluntness when complaining about the papacy’s financial activities, as seen in the chronicle of Matthew Paris. Matthew identified a range of practices that he denounced as abusive of local churches and monasteries, including the papal collation of benefices upon unworthy clergy, demanding subsidies for crusades that never actually happened, and commuting crusade-vows into cash payments. He reserved particular scorn for Dominican and Franciscan friars, who acted as agents for papal policies. Allowing for exaggeration, Matthew Paris paints
a vivid picture of the papacy’s growing administrative reach and the resentment it could cause. In 1250, one of his compatriots, Robert Grosseteste, took such complaints directly before the papal curia at Lyons, addressing the pope and cardinals in consistory. As the bishop of Lincoln, Grosseteste in no way denied the pope’s fullness of power, describing the papacy as a ‘spiritual sun’, shedding its light over all things on earth, illuminating, warming, and nourishing them. He also stressed, however, that a bishop enjoyed in his own diocese the same pastoral power over the souls committed to his care as the pope, granted to him directly by God. The only difference lay in the extent of their power, the bishop’s confined to his diocese, the pope’s extending over all churches. In the present day, however, that pastoral system had started to break down due to the failure of good pastors and spread of bad ones. What was the origin of such bad pastors? As Robert bluntly put it: ‘The cause, font, and origin of that situation is this curia’. Through its provisions, dispensations, and collation of benefices with pastoral care to those unworthy or inexperienced, the curia handed over the care of souls to those unqualified, much like handing over the tiller of a ship to someone unskilled in the arts of navigation or appointing a shepherd who was weak, ignorant, and neglectful of his flock. These current troubles, he observed, might portend the end of days and coming of Antichrist, although he too expressed his hope for the future renewal of the Church, not its destruction.

However much he exaggerated the papal achievement of the thirteenth century, A. C. Krey clearly intended his discussion of Christendom as a cautionary tale, recognizing the subsequent ‘failure’ of that ‘international order’. While the rise of the papal monarchy fits with the wider narrative of Europe’s expansionary twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the papacy’s ‘decline’ likewise plays a role in characterizing the late Middle Ages as a period of waning or crisis. Historians commonly point to Pope Boniface VIII (1294–1303) as a sign of this transition. In his 1302 bull *Unam sanctam*, embroiled in a struggle with the French ruler Philip IV over the king’s taxation of ecclesiastical properties and other perceived infringements of clerical liberties, Boniface confidently asserted the primacy of the Apostolic See in terms that Innocent III and Innocent IV would have appreciated. ‘We declare, state, define and pronounce’, he insisted, leaving no room for doubt, ‘that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff’. Yet within a year, after suffering capture and abuse at Anagni from French soldiers and their Italian allies, Boniface lay dead and Philip IV was well on his way to enjoying an unprecedented level of royal oversight over clerical affairs in his kingdom.

Again, what had changed? By the early fourteenth century, the political dynamics of Western Europe had begun to alter considerably since the era of Innocent III or even Innocent IV. On the one hand, somewhat ironically, the collapse of strong imperial power after Frederick II left a destabilizing power vacuum in the Kingdom of Sicily on the southern borders of the Papal States. In 1263, Pope Urban IV (1261–1264) convinced Charles of Anjou, brother of the French king Louis IX, to pacify the region. Although he ruled as a papal ally, Charles represented a powerful new competitor on the Italian peninsula. When the Sicilians revolted against Charles in 1282, inviting Peter of Aragon to rule the island, successive popes backed the Angevin cause, pouring sums of money into a protracted and devastating conflict. The exalted Vicars of Christ could not settle this turbulent situation in their own backyard. Meanwhile, after generations of focusing on empire as their key rivals
for Christian leadership, popes confronted the fact that territorial monarchies posed a far
great challenge to direct papal authority over regional and local churches. This political reality
developed in tandem with a shift in Christian political culture, as more and more intellectuals
– drawing in part upon Aristotle – recognized the sovereignty of the ‘State’ as the natural
form of human governance. Some, such as Marsilius of Padua in his *Defender of the Peace*,
directly challenged the papacy’s ‘fullness of power’, denying the Roman Church any role in
temporal matters.²⁶ Rome had its defenders, but increasingly the pope’s claim to jurisdiction
over spiritual and earthly matters seemed out of touch with political theories and realities,
the papal assertion of historical priority over kingship less and less convincing.

Coming on the heels of Boniface’s humiliation at Anagni, Pope Clement V (1305–1313),
a native of Aquitaine and archbishop of Bordeaux, never went to Rome after his election
and eventually settled in Avignon. Previous popes spent considerable time outside of Rome
(Innocent IV, for example, stayed for roughly half of his 11-year papacy at Lyons). Clement’s
decision to remain in Avignon, however, began a permanent papal residency in the city,
with the building of a vast complex complete with all the organs of papal governance. At
Avignon, the machinery of papal business hummed like never before. Removed from the
immediate resources of the Papal States, popes drew increasingly upon European-wide
sources of financial support, such as the collection of annates, a portion of the first-year’s
revenues from vacant or newly awarded benefices. Likewise, the papal curia continued to
attract churchmen from every corner of Europe seeking judgments, settlements, privileges,
and favors. Yet this fiscal and administrative efficiency generated intense criticisms by the
likes of literary giants such as Petrarch and Dante, who declared the Avignon papacy a new
kind of ‘Babylonian Captivity’, a place of liars, corrupt lawyers, and unscrupulous bureau-
crats. Although most historians would now agree that such pictures of the Avignon popes
exaggerated their decadence and ignored their legitimate attempts to curb abuses, the
papacy’s prestige nevertheless suffered like never before from such barbs.²⁷

Things grew worse after Gregory XI (1370–1378) finally returned to Rome in 1377 and
died shortly afterward. A majority of the cardinals regretted their decision to elect his
successor, Urban VI (1378–1389), and elected another pope, Clement VII. Urban remained
in Rome; Clement established himself in Avignon, creating the Great Schism, two lines of
popes that claimed the obedience of Christendom.²⁸ The Great Schism did even more
damage to the papacy’s reputation and intensified long-standing questions about the nature
of authority in the Church, seen in the works of dissenting voices such as John Wycliffe and
Jan Hus. At the councils of Pisa (1409) and Constance (1414–1417), assemblies of cardinals,
bishops, abbots, university masters, and lay representatives tried to negotiate an end to the
schism dividing Christendom. They did so by stressing the authority of ecumenical councils
to make decisions about the faith, ideally working in concert with the pope but ultimately
overriding his power. The conciliar tradition challenged the dominant mode of the papal
monarchy, highlighting the corporate nature of clerical governance rather than the Apostolic
See’s top-down leadership, currently standing in such a state of disrepair. The Council of
Constance successfully ended the Great Schism (and burned Jan Hus at the stake), removing
or marginalizing not two, but three, rival popes and electing Martin V (1417–1431).²⁹ Martin
and his successors sought to rehabilitate the papacy’s damaged position and succeeded to a
remarkable extent, but the reconfigured papal monarchy of the fifteenth century looked very
different from the papacy of the high Middle Ages. Although Rome managed to defuse the
challenge posed by conciliarism, popes witnessed the steady erosion of their rights and
privileges over Europe’s ‘national churches’ in England, France, and other places. Signing
concordats with European powers, popes bargained with kings and princes much like any other ruler, exchanging their rights of jurisdiction in return for various political concessions. Acting as veritable monarchs of the Papal States, popes of sometime questionable character, such as the Borgia pontiff Alexander VI (1492–1503), presided over a Renaissance court of dazzling cultural achievement.30

During this era of successive crises and retrenchment for the Roman papacy, European Christians grew more – not less – involved with the processes of securing their own religious salvation, experimenting with innovative forms of spiritual commitment, and creating new expressions of piety and devotion.31 Undeniably, given the outcome of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the papacy did not keep pace with these changes, or actively discouraged them as undesirable deviations from orthodoxy. Yet without discounting the realities of Christendom’s fragmentation and the decline of papal universalism, we should not underestimate the Roman Church’s enduring appeal heading toward the closure of the Middle Ages, as seen during the highly popular ‘jubilee’ pilgrimages held in 1300, 1350, 1390, 1423, 1450, 1475 and 1500, bringing thousands of the faithful to Rome seeking papal indulgences for the remission of their sins.32 Even the wealth and cultural achievements of the so-called Renaissance papacy, typically seen as a sign of how fifteenth-century popes indulged in material distractions from spiritual concerns, represented yet another historical reinvention of the Roman Church, recapturing the glories of ancient Rome, the master of the world.33

Nevertheless, for many, Saint Peter’s successors had lost their historical way. As they did during previous generations, some Christians sought apocalyptic inspiration or consolation as they confronted the lack of pastoral leadership over the Western Church. John of Rupescissa represented one such voice; a Franciscan who spent most of his life as a papal prisoner at Avignon in the fourteenth century, imagining future wars, plagues, and the violent overthrow of secular and clerical lords. (Given the outbreak of the Black Death, the Hundred Years War, and peasant rebellions later in John’s life, the friar’s predictions received considerable validation.) Toward the end of the fifteenth century, the Florentine prophet and rabble-rouser Savonarola offered his own denunciations of the papacy, framed as part of the ongoing battle between good and evil with Florence and not Rome as the center of the action. At the same time, even those who railed against the papacy continued to imagine the future coming of an ‘angelic’ pope; a future pontiff who would reject worldly things and lead the faithful into a new spiritual age, perhaps moving the papacy to Jerusalem. While Martin Luther began to level his devastating criticisms against the Roman Church, the clergy gathered at the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–1517) continued to project the papacy’s destiny into the future, predicting horrible trials for the faithful, but also the imminent recovery of Jerusalem and the spread of the Gospel around the world. Given the long memory of papal primacy, always contested but always responding to the changing circumstances of the present, perhaps we should not be entirely surprised at those attendees’ apparent inability to see truly what lay around the corner for the Western Christian tradition.34

Notes


20 For the Decretals, see Friedberg, *Corpus iuris canonici*, 2. See also the essays in W. Hartmann and K. Pennington (eds), *The History of Medieval Canon Law in the Classical Period, 1140–1234: From Gratian to the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX*, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008.

22 E. Winkelmann (ed.), *Fratris Arnoldi ord. praecl. de correctione ecclesiae epistola et anonymi de Innocentio IV. P. M. antichristo libellus*, Berlin: E. S. Mittler et filii, 1865.
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