CHAPTER II

The Church

and the Reform of Society

Early Efforts: The Cluny Reform Movement

THAT the evils in the church reflected the barbarous character of the feudal age is evident in what has already been described. It would be incorrect, however, to assume that the church entirely abdicated its spiritual position. Individual and collective efforts, though not as numerous or as effective as were needed, were directed at the worst misconduct of lay officials.

Against heavy odds and, it must be admitted, without too much success, the church also struggled to maintain the peace. Depredations were numerous. Innocent people suffered, and church property was often pillaged. Toward the end of the tenth century certain local synods in southern France proclaimed the “Peace of God,” which placed under severe ecclesiastical censure all who attacked clergy or church property. Later the poor and even merchants were included. The Peace of God was not altogether successful, since few lay authorities gave it adequate support. A little later, and somewhat more effective because it did receive some backing from the laity, was the “Truce of God,” which
attempted to prohibit private warfare on certain days and during certain seasons.

Although efforts such as these were local and in the long run unavailing, they show that many ecclesiastics and laymen were aware of the problems which beset feudal society and were determined to combat them. As their numbers increased, so did their courage. Eventually, out of experience came effective organization. By the eleventh century, reform was indeed in progress, and there began a veritable transformation of western European society. It commenced with a reform of monasticism, and the spirit and method by which it advanced stemmed largely, though not entirely, from Cluny, the monastery founded by Duke William of Aquitaine in 910.

The Cluny movement—for so it has been called—stood for two things above all: the restoration of monastic discipline and the liberation of monasticism from lay control. In pursuing the first objective, the early abbots of Cluny, of whom St. Odo (926–942) and St. Odilo (994–1049) were among the most celebrated, actually effected some important alterations in the Benedictine system. In order to achieve the ideal of perpetual collective prayer, the offices—that is, the services which the monks chanted together—were multiplied and lengthened. In fact, Cluny contributed significantly to the artistic elaboration of the church’s liturgy. Music, the chant, was developed, and the great Romanesque abbey church stood as testimony of the contemporary association between art and religion. Cluny also emphasized the service to the poor.

All this left less time for other monastic activities, and some have held that the healthy balance between prayer and
other useful occupations which had characterized the Benedictine Rule was upset. The Benedictine tradition of study, especially of the classics, languished. And perhaps because a larger proportion of monks were ordained priests, manual labor was not encouraged.

Another innovation was the association of more than one house with a single center. Some of the Cluny abbeys traveled widely and successfully spread the idea of monastic regeneration. Sometimes other abbeys requested Cluny to assume a kind of suzerainty over them. Others took in monastic “colonists” sent from Cluny. Thus, in one way or another, Cluny became the head of a great movement which spread throughout Europe. By the twelfth century the abbot of Cluny was recognized as the titular head of over three hundred houses. This was a distinct break with the Benedictine system of autonomous abbeys.

There was also a tendency for monasteries to place their foundations under the immediate protection of the Holy See. In return for a payment, or cenosi as it was called, rarely more than nominal, the pope might concede emancipation from the jurisdiction of the local bishop. The importance of this procedure lay in its emphasis on the central authority of Rome and the consequent curtailment of episcopal power. Monasteries so freed were no longer subject to the bishop’s visitation, and his presence was required only for such occasions as the conferring of the sacrament of holy orders on monastic candidates for the priesthood. The results were not always happy, and there were a number of misunderstandings between bishops and abbots, misunderstandings which were to be a source of conflict and even scandal until the jurisdictional ambiguity was resolved by the Council of
Trent in the sixteenth century. Notwithstanding, the practice continued. Eventually all Cluny houses and many others came under the immediate jurisdiction of the Holy See.

The second feature of the Cluny reform program, the liberation of monasteries from lay control, presented a different sort of problem and led finally to some acrimonious disputes with prominent laymen. But it was not always so. The fact that Cluny itself had been guaranteed freedom in its foundation charter is an indication that some laymen were beginning to realize that times were changing. During the turbulent days of invasion and feudal disorder, there had been considerable justification for procedures which provided physical security for the monasteries. The need for such protection was, however, passing; and some lay seigneurs, prompted by the same sort of piety which had induced their predecessors to endow abbeys, now often guaranteed emancipation. A sizable number of seigneurs also abandoned the abbatia, the control of the abbey estate and revenue. In a sense this was a restitution by one lord of property and jurisdiction appropriated by a predecessor. Although some sort of supervision was frequently retained, the emphasis was on protection, not control, by an “advocate,” as the lord was often called.

Reform Spreads to the Entire Church: The Age of Hildebrand

Important as was Cluny, it was not the only center of reform. Lorraine, for example, was also an area of significant activity. Moreover, although the primary purpose of the Cluny movement was the rehabilitation of monasticism, an impetus was provided for an equally important regeneration of the secular clergy. By the middle of the eleventh century,
Rome's leadership in the entire endeavor was evident. It should also be added that some of the rulers of Europe lent their willing co-operation even though it was apparent that whatever ecclesiastical jurisdiction they enjoyed was now challenged. A striking example is the Holy Roman Emperor Henry III (1039–1056), whose papal appointee, Leo IX (1049–1054), contributed materially to the strengthening of Rome's leadership.

Pope Leo IX, formerly Bruno of Toul and a Lorrainer, threw all his energies into combating prevailing abuses. He traveled wherever he could and summoned local clergy to reforming councils. To places he could not himself visit, he sent his legates. Accordingly, after Leo's pontificate there was no doubt that Rome was assuming its proper role as head of the church.

In the year 1059 there was enacted at Rome a decree providing for the election of the pope. The Roman bishop, it was stated, was thenceforth to be chosen by seven (later six) cardinal bishops, those who occupied the principal sees in the environs of the city. A somewhat larger number of cardinal priests, pastors of certain prominent Roman parishes, and cardinal deacons approved the choice. The people acclaimed the nominee. Thus the ancient canonical principle of election by clergy and people was preserved in form while the actual election by local clerics was guaranteed.

Leo IX and his immediate successors were ably assisted by a former monk, Hildebrand, who occupied the important position of archdeacon. Hildebrand was destined, as Pope Gregory VII (1073–1085), to leave a lasting impression on his time, and to many historians this is the "age of Hildebrand" or the "Gregorian era." Because Gregory's energetic measures resulted in a bitter struggle with the Holy
Roman Emperor Henry IV, his career has been variously estimated. To some he has seemed too intransigent, too eager to exalt papal authority. It is true that he had compiled a set of propositions, the Dictatus papae, which clearly stated Rome's supremacy. That the political implications of some of these propositions as well as certain of his actions were probably not fully understood by Gregory will be explained later. But it should be emphasized here that Gregory was neither a lawyer nor a politician. He was a mystic, a profoundly holy man who felt the divine presence in his soul. Whatever ambition he had was not for himself. Nor did he seek power for its own sake. In short, he was a monk whose heart ardently burned with a zeal to Christianize society.

Gregory began by reinforcing the policies of his predecessors. His legates traveled everywhere, and decrees against simony, clerical marriage, and such abuses multiplied. He met opposition in many places, and the prohibition of clerical marriage caused considerable individual hardship. But Gregory was generally supported by popular opinion and in the long run won out. As a consequence clerical morale was distinctly raised.

In one matter this energetic pope went a step beyond his predecessors. The famous decree of 1075 prohibiting lay investiture challenged the rulers of Europe. The subsequent investiture controversy, as it is often called, was a logical culmination of the church's struggle against secular encroachment. It was not equally severe in every country. The king of France, Philip I, for example, attempted some resistance, but his temperament and his extreme obesity rendered him unfit for any sustained action. Gregory evidently thought it unwise to press William the Conqueror of England, who at least appointed worthy bishops. Somewhat later
(1107), St. Anselm, a distinguished archbishop of Canterbury, after prolonged conflict with William II and Henry I was able to arrange a compromise on the matter of investiture.

The most spectacular controversy occurred in the Holy Roman Empire. This was so for two reasons. First, in the empire more than in any other part of Christendom, bishops tended to be counts and, therefore, directly associated with government. Second, the young Emperor Henry IV was stubbornly insistent on maintaining a control over ecclesiastics precisely because they were governmental officials. The young emperor summoned a council of German bishops who, as royal appointees, were for the most part loyal and agreed to the deposition of Gregory. Henry then wrote a letter to the pope which closes in the following violent language:

Thou, therefore, damned by this curse and by the judgment of all our bishops and ourselves, come down and relinquish the apostolic chair which thou has usurped. Let another assume the seat of St. Peter, who will not practice violence under the cloak of religion, but will teach St. Peter's wholesome doctrine. I, Henry, king by the grace of God, together with all our bishops, say unto thee: “Come down, come down, to be damned throughout all eternity!”

At a synod held in Rome somewhat later in 1075, various bishops who had subscribed to the action in Germany were excommunicated. Following is the sentence pronounced against Siegfried, archbishop of Mainz:

In accordance with the judgment of the Holy Spirit and by the authority of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, we suspend from every episcopal function, and exclude from the com-
munion of the body and blood of the Lord, Siegfried, archbishop of Mainz, who has attempted to cut off the bishops and abbots of Germany from the Holy Roman Church, their spiritual mother—unless perchance in the hour of death, and then only if he shall come to himself and truly repent.

Gregory then solemnly anathematized Henry “since he has refused to obey as a Christian should or to return to the God whom he has abandoned by taking part with excommunicated persons . . . and has separated himself from thy Church.”

Excommunication is the most severe penalty the church can inflict. It deprives the one excommunicated of all sacraments until he is willing to repent and make whatever restitution is necessary. Since it is presumed that because of his offense he is in a state of mortal sin, his immortal soul is gravely endangered. There are also political implications in the excommunication of a ruler, for his subjects associate with him at their peril. Indeed, Gregory in his sentence against Henry specifically deposed the emperor and absolved his subjects from their oath of allegiance.

Whether Gregory fully realized the political consequences of his action is debatable. But the fact remains that Henry was faced with a serious situation. Indeed, many of his lay vassals regarded the excommunication as a heaven-sent sanction for rebellion. It was to force the pope’s hand, therefore, that the young ruler crossed the Alps in winter. At Canossa, where Gregory was staying, he stood in the snow as a penitent. The pope hesitated. Since the emperor was willing to make the necessary promises, however, he

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as a priest was bound to absolve the contrite sinner. As a result Henry was reinstated.

Despite later interpretations representing Canossa as the humiliation of state before church, it was Henry, not Gregory, who now had the advantage. He soon resumed his former practices and, as Gregory delayed action, gained strength sufficient to defy a second excommunication and deposition. When the pope died in southern Italy, a virtual prisoner of the Normans who had “rescued” him, Henry’s troops were in command of Rome.

It is a tribute, however, to Gregory’s devotion and to the solid achievements of his predecessors that in the long run his cause triumphed. Worthy successors carried the work forward. Urban II (1088–1099), the pope who launched the First Crusade, was particularly successful. Equally firm in principle, he was more diplomatic and moderate in practice. At length a settlement was reached at Worms in 1122. This concordat, or agreement, which followed closely that earlier arranged in England, formally abolished lay investiture of the ring and crozier, the symbols of the bishop’s spiritual jurisdiction. The emperor might present the scepter, symbol of temporal power, and he was permitted to be present at the election. Thus, although lay investiture was ended, lay interference in elections was not entirely obviated.

The Early Twelfth Century: St. Bernard of Clairvaux

It has been frequently observed of western monasticism that it possesses a remarkable capacity for self-renewal and an ability to adapt itself to changing circumstances. Hence its variety. Cluny answered admirably a great need for re-
form and for an organization which could combat the decentralizing tendencies of feudalism. Its abbeys exercised considerable ecclesiastical influence, and among their number were men of great distinction. Peter the Venerable (1122–1157), for example, scholar as well as churchman, was one of the finest characters of the twelfth century. By the early twelfth century, however, many Cluny houses had become richly endowed establishments with handsome abbey churches and costly furnishings. In certain instances, discipline suffered. This did not mean that there were such pronounced scandals as in the turbulent days of early feudalism. Yet the departure from Benedictine simplicity elicited criticism. Thus it was that the Cluny reform was followed by others.

In Italy, St. Romuald (d. 1027) provided a combination of the eremitical and the corporate monastic life later known as the Camaldolese order. In 1084, a German, St. Bruno, founded a community, at La Grande Chartreuse in the French Alps, in which monks maintained almost complete silence and abstained totally from meat. Here was an exclusive dedication to prayer and worship. Although the order was not officially approved until late in the twelfth century, constitutions were drawn up in 1128. Perhaps best known for a liqueur invented in the nineteenth century, the Carthusians may boast that they are one of the very few orders which have continued to the present day without need of reform.

It remained, however, for the Cistercians to accomplish for the twelfth century what the Cluniacs had done for the eleventh. That they did so was largely owing to the efforts of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (b. 1090, d. 1153). It was in 1113 that Bernard, then a young nobleman, brought with him to
the Benedictine abbey at Citeaux a band of companions in-
tent upon an austere monastic life. Citeaux had been founded
by St. Robert of Molesmes and was dedicated to a literal
observance of the Benedictine Rule. It had faced many dis-
couragements. Now it received a new lease on life. In 1115,
Bernard was sent to found a new house at Clairvaux which,
in fact, proved to be the first of 163 abbeys established by
this energetic monk.

The order—for a separate and distinct monastic organiza-
tion came into being—was given constitutions drawn up
by an Englishman, Stephen Harding, and, in 1119, approved
by the pope. The Cistercians wore a white habit which dis-
tinguished them from the Benedictine black. The regime of
fast and abstinence was severe, and no elaborate furnishings
were permitted in Cistercian abbey churches. Hence in a
period which saw the flowering of mediaeval art, Cistercian
abbeys were plain and unadorned, though often of exquisite
design. As an organization the Cistercian order avoided at
once Cluniac centralization and Benedictine isolation. Each
monastery was self-governing under its abbot, but periodical
general chapters of abbots preserved uniformity. By 1152
there were some 350 abbeys.

Like Cluny earlier, the Cistercian order was also associated
with contemporary social developments. The white monks
preferred remote and solitary places and were often found
in the frontier regions of mediaeval Europe. The German
expansion eastward owed much to them. They were also
active in some of the newly discovered mining regions.
In the Low Countries they pioneered in reclaiming land
from the sea, and in England they were prominent in the
production of wool. But these were the nonreligious achieve-
ments of the Cistercians and were in considerable part the
work of lay brothers, *conversi*, as they were called. The Cistercian Rule, however, placed great emphasis on manual labor for the monks themselves and, although exceptions were made in frontier regions, forbade the employment of peasants.

Not only the Cistercian order but the church as a whole owed an immense debt to St. Bernard. Even a cursory account of this extraordinary man's career would fill a chapter. He was constantly journeying—usually against his inclinations—across Europe as the adviser of popes and kings. He preached the Second Crusade and formulated the rule for the religio-military order of Knights Templar. He eloquently opposed innovation in doctrine and withstood the redoubtable Abelard. He composed many sermons and hymns, some of which are still familiar. When one of his own brethren became pope as Eugenius III, he prepared for him a famous treatise, entitled *De consideratione*, of which the theme is the necessity of meditation before action. St. Bernard had no sympathy with the busy and somewhat worldly papal *curia*.

It might well be asked how he found time for the ideal of his own heart, the religious life. Indeed, he repeatedly complained that he was drawn away from it. Yet, since he possessed to an unusual degree the capacity to withdraw from temporal distractions, even when surrounded by them, he lived in contemplation of things spiritual. To this transcendent capacity Dante paid tribute, when in his celebrated poem, the *Divine Comedy*, he placed St. Bernard close to the divine presence in paradise. With equal justice, historians have often called the first half of the twelfth century the "age of St. Bernard."

A contemporary of St. Bernard, St. Norbert (b. 1080,
d. 1134), founded the canons regular of Prémontré (near Laon in France) or Premonstratensian canons. The Rule, drawn up by Norbert's followers, was based mainly on the Rule of St. Augustine, but was influenced by other systems. At least some education was required of candidates, and progress in knowledge was a prerequisite to ordination to the priesthood. The Rule, moreover, emphasized the service which Premonstratensian canons were to render the parish churches in their neighborhoods. In short, Premonstratensian houses were centers of missionary activity dedicated to raising the morale of local clergy.

Thus by the middle years of the twelfth century the church had been transformed from an institution struggling to preserve its integrity against the centrifugal forces of an imperfectly civilized feudal society into an organization of authority capable of exerting an influence of its own. Clerical morale had been measurably raised. A marked increase in the number and quality of schools was beginning to have a salutary effect on the training of the clergy. Lay society, too, had changed. The days of turbulence and chronic insecurity were over. A spacious period of positive achievement was opening, and to the story of the church in this happier age we now turn.
CHAPTER III

The Church

in the High Middle Ages

THE twelfth and thirteenth centuries are sometimes designated the "high Middle Ages" because in that period what we have come to regard as mediaeval civilization reached a climax. It was a time of diminishing feudalism and more competent government, of commerce and towns, of money and credit, of increasing and freer agriculture, of learning and art. The area affected by western European civilization in 1300 was considerably larger than in the year 1000. Mediaeval feudal society was dynamic, and thousands of knights, merchants, peasants, and missionaries pushed the frontiers outward or passed overseas to found settlements in the Levant. The problems this expanding mediaeval civilization presented to the church were many and varied, but the church was better equipped to meet them. Much as contemporary kingdoms perfected new systems of administration, so the church improved its instrument of government. This structure has been called, not inaptly, the papal monarchy.