CHAPTER IV

The Popes and Political Authority

IN ALL periods of history the church has had to deal with temporal rulers. Even our modern secular age has its problems of church and state. The Middle Ages were no exception, although the political atmosphere in which these relations and, unfortunately, often controversies took place was very different from our own. Difficulties appeared on every level of the ecclesiastical and governmental hierarchies. The investiture dispute, for example, involved not only popes, but many bishops and, in England, the archbishop of Canterbury.

It was also an archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, who challenged King Henry II (1154–1189) on a matter of English judicial practice. Should clerics found guilty of crime in ecclesiastical courts be punished—a second time, Becket claimed—by secular judges? This famous controversy was especially noteworthy in that it resulted in the archbishop's exile and later martyrdom. Because of widespread indignation at Becket's murder, the English government was, for a time, forced to moderate its demands. The Becket-Henry II quarrel might further be emphasized as an instance of a kind of adjustment which more and more

became necessary as government gained competence and effectiveness. Once a monarchy such as the English extended and improved its judicial procedures, the problem of its jurisdiction over clergy was bound to arise.

A comparable problem arose in the financial realm of government. Should clergy be taxed by kings? Students of French history will remember that King Philip IV (1285–1314) said yes and Pope Boniface VIII (1294–1303) said no. This most spectacular of church-government controversies occurred at the close of the high Middle Ages. Moreover, it involved the papacy, and the papacy presents a special problem which it will be well to elucidate first.

There are two aspects of the papal political program in the Middle Ages. The first, and by far the most easily understood, is the maintenance and government of the papal lands in central Italy. The second, the relations between popes and secular rulers, can be properly understood only against the background of contemporary events and ideas. It will be appropriate, therefore, to consider the papal states at this point.

*The Papal States*

When the papacy and the Italian government signed the Lateran Treaty in 1929, they were endeavoring to settle in modern terms a question which is as old as the church. For what is known as the Roman Question was raised as soon as the church, emerging from the catacombs, began to take shape as a world-wide organization. Reduced to its essentials, the question is simply one of insistence by the popes upon a territorial state of sufficient size to guarantee political independence for the papacy so that the unhindered administration of the universal church would be assured. The man-
ner of achieving this independence has varied with the political vicissitudes of the Italian peninsula and with changing conceptions of sovereignty. The actual boundaries of the papal state have been the cause of numerous controversies. The principle of territorial independence, however, gradually clarified during the early Middle Ages, has never ceased to be a vital factor in papal policies.

The nucleus of the papal lands was an aggregation of donations dating from the early days of Christianity, widely scattered, but mostly in the vicinity of Rome. Together they came to be known as the Patrimony of St. Peter, a term later used to designate the southwestern portion of the states of the church including Rome. Other gifts followed. In 756, for example, the Frankish ruler Pepin, after defeating the Lombards in north Italy, rescued a large section of former imperial territory, including the region around Ravenna, but instead of restoring it to the emperor at Constantinople, entrusted it to the pope. Subsequent additions which included the duchy of Spoleto (Umbria), the march of Ancona, and southern Tuscany rounded out the traditional papal states in central Italy. An irregular territory with constantly fluctuating boundaries which few mediaeval popes could maintain intact, it stretched, at least in theory, from the River Adige on the northeast to the Garigliano south of Rome.

Until the fifth century the papal possession of land was primarily a matter of property ownership. With the disappearance of the western Roman Empire and the consequent absence of any effective central government, there arose a new and more significant question of political jurisdiction. As imperial authority, now centered in Constantinople, became less and less effective in Italy, the popes were forced to
provide for the administration of their lands. For a time in the ninth century Charlemagne (d. 814) restored imperial authority over northern and central Italy. But the political center of gravity of his authority was the Frankish empire of the West, not Constantinople. Moreover, Carolingian privileges in Rome soon became illusory as a consequence of the collapse of the Frankish empire during the ninth century. There followed a kind of anarchy as the military aristocracy in and about Rome, a semibrigand landowning nobility, quick to sense the greater temporal significance of papal power, sought to usurp the authority of their lord through control of the papal office. The same sort of thing was happening to many bishoprics throughout Christendom, but the loss of prestige by the Roman see was of deeper significance.

This was the unhappy situation when the German King Otto I (936–973) and his successors renewed the Carolingian pretensions to power in Italy. Benevolent as this German tutelage was, it presupposed a control which the church of the Cluny era found intolerable. In fact, it was in part against this imperial encroachment on the Holy See that the decree of 1059 on papal elections was directed.

In governing the papal states of central Italy, the popes experienced all the problems which any monarch of the day faced. In addition, their preoccupation with ecclesiastical matters undoubtedly accentuated the defects of administration common to every mediaeval state. In the high Middle Ages the communal movement was added to the perennial problem of a turbulent nobility.

Although the dependent towns were expected to contribute to defense and the feudal nobility were theoretically
the clergy's army, the chronic instability of Rome and the papal territory precluded any very effective military force. Pope Leo IX (1049–1054), despite severe criticism, led a kind of holy war against the Normans of southern Italy. Later the Norman rulers became papal vassals and "rescued" Gregory VII from the Emperor Henry IV. Local princes outside the papal states sometimes lent their aid. On certain occasions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Lombard cities, similarly menaced by the Hohenstaufen German emperors, proved to be valuable allies. Finally, especially in the early thirteenth century, defense of the papal lands was designated a crusade and merged in the larger designs of the popes. Thus the diplomacy of the papal states acquired a broadly European significance.

An especially difficult problem was the government of Rome itself. Mediaeval Rome was but a shadow of the city of the Caesars. Barbarian attacks and the sieges of the sixth century had badly battered the once proud metropolis. With aqueducts cut, the city of the seven hills was a thing of the past, and the population dwindled to a paltry few thousand composed of a decadent military aristocracy, the clergy, and an indigent populace. In the ninth century Saracen raids forced Pope Leo IV to enclose Vatican hill with fortifications. Separate from the rest of the town and thenceforth known as the Leonine city, it contained St. Peter's and the formidable castle of St. Angelo, formerly the tomb of the Emperor Hadrian. In the feudal age unruly nobles raised their own private towers. Ancient ruins—even the famous Coliseum—were made over into strongholds or their marble blocks quarried out for use in new buildings. Churches, monasteries, and private dwellings were fortified.
Ruins, symbols of ancient glory, were lost amid signs of feudal confusion—such was the strange aspect of the city of the popes.

The decree of 1059 had restored the election of the popes to the clergy, but had by no means removed the baneful influence of noble factions on the temporal administration of the city. The situation was further complicated by the appearance of a popular democratic element which, supported by many of the lesser nobles, was ready at the behest of any demagogue to proclaim its independence of both pope and aristocracy. Disorders and insurrections were not uncommon. Moreover, the mediaeval inhabitants of the eternal city fancied themselves the political descendants of ancient Romans. In 1144, for example, Pope Eugenius III was compelled to recognize a “senate.” In 1188 a charter was drawn up in the name of the Senatus populusque Romanus and was dated not from the year of the reigning pontiff, but “from the forty-fourth year of the institution of the senate at the capitol.” Thus the insignia of a once mighty empire adorned a mediaeval commune of a few thousand souls.

A semblance of order was obtained during the pontificate of Innocent III. Innocent’s diplomacy, his generosity, and his charity, combined with the Romans’ realization that the pope’s presence was profitable to them, eventually produced a working agreement. The restoration of papal supremacy throughout Europe brought a stream of suitors, pilgrims, and ecclesiastics from all over the world. Supplying the needs of these people was an occupation far too remunerative to endanger by political wrangling. Innocent also won over many citizens by his encouragement of merchants, by providing alms for the poor, and especially by founding a hospital, later famous as the Hospital of the Holy Spirit, to
which no one was denied entrance. He was also more successful than most popes in the administration of the papal states.

Such was the "Roman Question" of the Middle Ages—the establishment of an independent papal state and its defense against usurpation from within and encroachment from without. Defense against invasion became a factor in the papacy's relations with the rulers of Europe, in particular the Holy Roman Emperors, and will be considered further in the following pages.

The Relations between the Popes and the Kingdoms of Europe

In governing Rome and the papal states, the popes employed a direct political authority that can properly be called temporal power. The influence which some popes exercised over secular rulers is an entirely different matter. Actually this papal "intervention" in the affairs of kingdoms is a temporary development and peculiar to the high Middle Ages. Broadly speaking, it resulted from the contemporary interpenetration of things religious and things secular.

Centuries of what has been aptly described as the "secularization of politics" have familiarized the modern world with the idea of an autonomous sovereign state without religious affiliation. But this modern conception of the state as an autonomous political entity, sovereign within its boundaries, scarcely existed in the feudal world of the Middle Ages. Further, the idea of a "church" as an organization apart from the rest of organized society was foreign to the mediaeval mind.

There existed also, especially during the early Middle Ages, a tradition of Roman political unity. This was an
idealized concept that the world—or at least Christian Europe—should be politically a unit as it once had been. A powerful tradition, it stood out even in the darkest ages as an ideal which, although never realized, was never abandoned. This ideal was, for example, partly responsible for the persistence in the West of the title Holy Roman Emperor and its assumption by the kings of Germany, although actually this so-called Holy Roman Empire was no more centralized than other European states. Furthermore, on the tradition of Roman political unity had been engrafted the idea of a Christian universalism which the mediaeval mind identified with the “City of God” of St. Augustine.

St. Augustine, it will be remembered, wrote his great *De Civitate Dei* to answer the pagan charge that desertion of the ancient gods was responsible for the “fall”—or at least the sack—of Rome in 410. From this supernatural view of history, early mediaeval thinkers apparently derived their ideal of a religio-political world state as the earthly counterpart of the “City of God.” This Augustinian tradition, or political Augustinianism, as it has sometimes been called, conceived of a single unified Christian society which under God had two heads, the pope and the king. There were not two separate societies composed of those in the church and those in the state, because each was coterminous with the other, each included the other. Precisely the same people who were in the church were in the state.

The purpose of this unified Christian society which the Augustinian tradition presented was both religious and secular. It must not only bear witness to Christian revelation and provide for the proper worship of God. It must also serve the ends of justice. It is not surprising, therefore, to find frequent references to the essentially religious character of
kingship. Anointed by the priest, he is the chosen defender of the faith, whose duty it is to co-operate in the work of saving souls. Moreover, there were times, for example during the reign of Charlemagne, when the emperor actually assumed spiritual authority. It was the emperor who was called the "vicar of God." A large number of Charlemagne's laws dealt with purely religious matters. In the ninth century, therefore, the unified Christian society was dominated by the emperor, a quasi-religious figure who regarded himself, and acted as, superior in both spirituals and temporals. The distinction so familiar to modern times was completely absent. For a time, at least, the temporal seemed to be the directing force.

With one or two exceptions this temporal hegemony continued to be exercised in varying degrees by many of Charlemagne's successors down to the eleventh century. Gradually thereafter the roles were reversed. Following the recovery of the church during the Cluny period and as a consequence of such controversies as that over lay investiture and the long struggle between the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and Pope Alexander III, the ecclesiastical rather than the secular tended to dominate. Each viewpoint had its advocates. Political theorists who sought to exalt imperial dignity were opposed by canonists and theologians who more precisely defined the papal position. Both profited immensely by the contemporary legal revival. In the case of the papacy, it is most important to note, a reasonably clear policy and objective developed in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century.

In addition to the customary insistence on unhindered

---

2 On Frederick Barbarossa, see Painter, The Rise of the Feudal Monarchies, pp. 108 ff.
supervision over the clergy everywhere, certain popes made a valiant attempt to attain peace and justice in Christendom by securing the universal recognition of papal political overlordship. This conception, hardly developed in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, was clearly enunciated and nearly realized by the lawyer-popes of the thirteenth century. It implied a kind of union of European states under papal supervision. Accordingly, although the thirteenth-century popes claimed no direct temporal authority outside the papal states, they did attempt to form a sort of federation of kingdoms under papal suzerainty. The primary purpose of this union was a peaceful Christendom conducive to the spiritual and moral welfare of all. But there is no doubt that many popes also hoped that, thus united, Christendom could successfully defend itself against the ever-present Moslem menace and recover Jerusalem. It should be added that this feature of papal policy, the political union of Christendom, is peculiar to the Middle Ages, indeed to the thirteenth century. It was the result partly of contemporary political conditions and partly of the political Augustinianism characteristic of the age.

Papal political action, therefore, was supposed always to have an implicit religious purpose. Sometimes religious aims seem obscured by political methods and consequences. Some popes undoubtedly were less able to maintain a personal detachment than were others. We are not, however, dealing here with a contest for political supremacy, but with an attempt to secure religious ends by means which today we would call political.
The Politics and Diplomacy of Pope Innocent III

It was during the pontificate of Innocent III that the papal temporal pre-eminence reached its height. Never were conditions so ripe for the exercise of some such power as he claimed, and no pope before or since so nearly succeeded in making effective the supremacy of the Holy See over the princes of Europe. Innocent was not an innovator. He followed in the footsteps of his predecessors. But he was gifted with an eloquence and a diplomatic skill which gave a real distinction to his words as well as to his actions.

In virtue of the pope's plenitude of power, Innocent claimed an almost limitless jurisdiction. On one occasion, in comparing the spiritual and temporal authorities, he used the analogy of the sun and the moon. Yet in action he was more circumspect and, as a good lawyer, moved only when sound precedent so indicated. Innocent was, however, no rigid doctrinaire. In applying his conception of pontifical power to the everyday affairs of Europe, he displayed the diplomat's ability to compromise as well as the canonist's knowledge of law.

To recount Innocent III's political career adequately is impossible here. The outstanding developments, therefore, will serve as illustrations. In the Holy Roman Empire, Innocent's conception of papal pre-eminence is particularly well exemplified. As his predecessors before him, he claimed special juridical rights within the empire. These rights were not guaranteed by any feudal contract; nor were they, in the pope's view, based on any general theory of papal temporal overlordship. Rather they were grounded on a traditional relationship dating from the early Middle Ages. Innocent
asserted that the papal coronation of Charlemagne in 800 amounted to a "translation" of power from Byzantium to the West by the authority of the papacy. Papal coronation, therefore, was not a mere ceremony, but a formal investiture of imperial power. To the princes belonged the right to elect the emperor, but the election must be confirmed by the pope, who was sole arbiter in cases of dispute. The actual situation confronting Innocent in the empire required both the statement and the exercise of these powers.

The story of Innocent's intervention in the long civil war precipitated by Henry VI's untimely death belongs essentially to the history of the empire. The important fact here is that the young Frederick II, the pope's ward as king of Sicily and his ultimate candidate for the imperial throne, finally emerged victorious in 1214. Moreover, the new emperor made two significant agreements. First, Frederick agreed that his son, then an infant, should be given Sicily. This, it was hoped, would effectively separate the administration of the southern kingdom from that of the empire. Second, he promised to go on a crusade. Thus Innocent seemed at long last to have protected the church, restored to a war-torn Europe some promise of peace, and provided for the crusade. It is true that his high hopes were not to be fulfilled. But when the pope died in 1216, there was reason for optimism.

Innocent's influence was also felt in other states. He continued the feudal policy already developed by his predecessors. In such kingdoms as England, Portugal, Aragon, Sicily, Hungary, Poland, and certain Balkan states, where a feudal contractual relation with the Holy See existed or

was claimed, he jealously guarded his rights as suzerain and wherever possible protected the rights and interests of his vassals. Never a complete success, the papal feudal policy was, however, typical of the age. At best it could and did provide Rome with financial, moral, and occasionally military support. It also strengthened the hand of many a ruler against his adversaries. But papal vassals were usually irregular in the payment of the required *census* and wavering in their political loyalty.

England, although in some ways an exceptional case, is a useful example. King John, it will be recalled, had opposed the pope’s right to appoint to the see of Canterbury. When he finally capitulated after years of excommunication and interdict and accepted Innocent’s choice of Stephen Langton, he made over his realm as a fief to the Holy See. Manifestly, the king hoped to win papal support against his enemies. It is true that Innocent annulled Magna Carta shortly after its issuance. Whether the pope did this on feudal grounds is, however, a debatable point; and it has been suggested that he condemned the document as extorted by force and containing provisions incompatible with kingly authority. Whatever the reasons, the pope’s condemnation did not, in fact, weaken the barons’ case. Moreover, the *census* which was due the Holy See from its English fief was grudgingly and irregularly paid and was abolished by Parliament in 1377.

Innocent was careful to distinguish between the vassal states and those admitting no feudal allegiance. Except for normal action to protect local clerical rights, he intervened in such kingdoms, as he himself said, in cases of grievous sin or where careful investigation convinced him that his inter-
ference was legally justified. Thus when princes violated the laws of marriage, the pope was quick to act. León, Castile, and France felt the interdict.

In France, however, his intervention met strong opposition. King Philip Augustus (1180–1223) repudiated his wife, Ingeborg, a Danish princess, and managed to procure an annulment from a council of French bishops and barons. Ingeborg then appealed to Rome, and Celestine III, Innocent’s predecessor, took steps to quash the judgment. Since Philip proceeded to marry again, Innocent took up the case upon his accession and laid France under an interdict. Eventually the king submitted, but it was years before Ingeborg was reinstated. Meanwhile Philip dealt arbitrarily with the French clergy. Taxes and feudal service were required in spite of the interdict. Moreover, the pope’s attempts to mediate in an Anglo-French quarrel over Normandy were fruitless.

Although, as the cases of France and England indicate—and others could be cited—Innocent’s policies did not win universal acceptance, he never tired in the pursuit of his aims. Indeed, he did not hesitate to take up matters of only individual or personal importance provided adequate legal grounds for papal action could be found. More than once he championed the rights of widows and minors.

We have dwelt at some length on Innocent’s political activities because this remarkable pope approached more closely than any other the goal of a united Christendom. It is true that after the death of Innocent the young Frederick II betrayed the trust his guardian had placed in him. Notwithstanding, as a modern historian has aptly put it, “the modern student will be amazed to discover how nearly Innocent III succeeded in realizing the utopian ideal of a
world-organization based on peace and justice. . . The fact that he failed is not nearly so significant as the degree of success he achieved in the pursuit of an ideal which was itself nothing less than perfection."  

Innocent aimed at an international order based on law. The juristic system which he envisaged would have been built on contemporary feudal, Roman, and canon law. Modern nations might reject the particular juridical basis which Innocent had in mind, but a world order founded on respect for law is still the hope of civilized humanity.

_Innocent III's Successors_

The century following Innocent's death forms at once an epilogue to his career and a prologue to a new age. His manifold assertions of papal political rights found their way into the collections of decretals and provided his successors with material for even more extensive theocratic claims. In the struggle with the Holy Roman Empire, fortune first favored the imperialists, as the young Frederick II, Innocent's protégé, not only held Sicily and southern Italy, but managed by extensive concessions to maintain peace in Germany. When, in addition, he had subdued northern Italy, an attempt was made to negotiate with the papacy; but Innocent IV, genuinely alarmed, declined to compromise. Indeed, the war against the emperor became a crusade and the customary indulgence was offered to all who participated. In 1250 death robbed Frederick of victory, and three years later Innocent IV was able to return to Rome after an absence of nine years. Although the dispute dragged on for some years and in-
volved Innocent's successors in new diplomatic entanglements, Frederick's death was the turning point in the historic struggle of papacy and empire.

It is in estimating the significance of Innocent IV's success that the historian is forced to recognize not only the culmination of the struggle which began with Gregory VII, but the appearance of political forces pertaining to a new era. Innocent explicitly laid claim to supremacy over the princes of the earth. In fact, his deposition of Frederick II at the Council of Lyons in 1245 has been cited as one of the clearest and most typical statements of the principle of papal temporal overlordship. Yet, except for his triumph over the empire and his dealings with some of the smaller states, his claim to political supremacy was unavailing. Nor was this solely because he was so absorbed in the struggle with Frederick that he was unable to give adequate attention to the rest of Europe. The fact is that the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire did not pave the way for the triumph of that papal universalism of which Innocent III had dreamed. Instead, there developed a secular particularism of national monarchies. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Innocent IV's relations with England and France. Henry III of England and Louis IX of France were both exceptionally pious rulers. Henry was a papal vassal. Louis was a saint. Yet neither accepted the full implication of Innocent's theocratic claims. Although Louis promised to protect the pope if he were attacked in Lyons, he attempted more than once to mediate in the dispute. Both kings continued to address Frederick as emperor even after papal deposition.

While national monarchies like England and France gained strength during the later thirteenth century, papal political influence waned. The famous controversy between
Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip IV of France, to which we alluded briefly at the commencement of this chapter, represents, therefore, a kind of anticlimax in the mediaeval struggle between ecclesiastical and secular power. Boniface was already an old man when he became pope. Moreover, he had many enemies in Italy, some of whom like the poet Dante regarded him as corrupt and wholly unfit for so exalted an office. Notwithstanding, he was a stalwart defender of the papal position. When the pope forbade rulers to tax the clergy without papal permission, Philip, and also Edward I of England, successfully resisted. For a while Boniface dropped the matter and then, shortly after the turn of the century, reopened it. In addition, he protested an adverse decision against a bishop on the part of a secular court. But Philip had assured himself of popular support by summoning a large representative assembly which proved to be the first Estates General. Thus the celebrated bull, Unam sanctam, which re-emphasized papal supremacy, made little impression in France. In fact, shortly afterward Nogaret, one of Philip’s henchmen, together with Boniface’s Italian enemies stormed the pope’s residence at Anagni and arrested him. Shocked by the brutality of the perpetrators of this “terrible day of Anagni,” public opinion now began to veer toward the pope. He was accordingly released, only to die a month later.

What is the meaning of this episode? It seems clear that European Christians no longer accepted papal interference in what were now regarded as purely political matters. Although there remained doubt as to precisely what constituted purely political matters, the competence of a monarchy within its frontiers was now a fairly well-established fact. But it seems equally clear that an outrage
committed against a pope, however unpopular, was widely resented. This is important. Boniface was not a beloved pope; he was regarded in many quarters as a grasping simonist. He evidently had personal enemies in Italy. Dante, it will be recalled, reserved a place for him in Hell. Yet he was still the vicar of Christ. And Dante also reflected the sense of shock felt at Philip's conduct.

It would appear, therefore, that although political terminology familiar to the twentieth century would not have been understood, men in the later thirteenth century were becoming aware of a distinction between secular and religious authority and were willing to recognize the rights of each in its own sphere. It was to be centuries before this modern—or Roman—conception of sovereignty was to be fully understood. Nevertheless, the world of 1300 was, politically speaking, indeed different from that of 1100 or even 1200.

In conclusion it might be emphasized that the notion of a Europe federated politically under papal suzerainty was, like the crusades, vassalage, chivalry, and such matters, the product of the feudal age and passed as feudalism passed. Certainly it had few advocates in the later Middle Ages, and their voices were raised in vain. In modern times the idea has disappeared.