

Reform in the Church

Our Catholic Heritage

A Resurrection Stirs in the Church

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS
"From the fury of the Northman, O Lord, deliver us!"

With the passing of Charlemagne (d. 813) and St. Nicholas the Great (d. 867), the West fell into a genuine dark age, made more terrible by the decline of the Church.

The worst of the barbarian invasions were in full cry. Every Christian soul in the north lived in fear of the Vikings. The fierce Magyars of Hungary were devastating the central provinces of Europe.

The Moslems controlled the Mediterranean sea lanes, and governed a huge crescent of territory from Turkey, through Africa, to Spain. In 844 A.D. their armies had sacked the grave of Peter at the Vatican.

The Church had sunk to tragic debasement unparalleled in her history. This was the age of the bad papacies, short violent reigns, dim with blood and ignorance. Well could the council of St. Basle de Verzy (991) ask in agony:

"Where are the Leos and Grego-

ry? . . . Is it our fault that the head of all the Churches that stood so high, renowned with honor and glory, has fallen so low, crowned with infamy and shame?"

Bishops and priests too were caught up in the general feudal anarchy, where might made right. Simony, the buying and selling of sacred offices, had become a way of life. Clerical concubinage was epidemic. Church administration in many areas was non-existent. A true dark age of the soul!

There is, however, within the Church, as her very soul, the power of the Resurrection, with the turn of the year 1000 A.D., life stirred within the Bride of Christ.

"There had come the best year since the Immaculate Virgin brought forth our salvation, and a radiant dawn was seen to shine upon the world." (Thietmar of Mersebourg)

The peoples of the North at last heeded the Gospel. Under leaders like Prince Mieszko (d992) and his

wife Dobrawa, and warriors like Boleslas the Valiant (d.1025), a flame was kindled in Poland that burns in the heart of the Church to this day. Under kings like St. Knut of Denmark (d.1131), St. Olaf of Norway (d.1030) and St. Eric of Sweden (d.1160), the sea-farers of the North boarded the Barque of Peter. St. Stephen of Hungary (d.1038) married the courage of the magyars to the truth of the Gospel.

The monasteries of the West were the cradles of genuine reform in the morals and learning of the clergy. The greatest of these was Cluny, founded in 916 A.D. and governed by a succession of saints till 1109. This was the new force, pure and vigorous, that was to pour out a torrent of reform, and re-educate Europe in the fear of God. Cluny proved to be a nursery of popes, cardinals and bishops for generations to come. By 1100, Cluny governed 1,450 houses and 10,000 monks in all the provinces of Christendom.

The papacy, foundation of faith and citadel for order, must also be

the font of reform. The Church has shown a remarkable ability to reform herself from the top down. Never more so than in the middle ages.

Where were the Leos and Grego-ry? St. Leo IX (1048-54) began the campaign against abuses, and St. Gregory VII carried it to the highest quarters.

Great reforming councils were yet to come, at the Lateran in Rome in 1123, 1139 and 1179. Simony was attacked. Celibacy was imposed on the clergy. Canon law was codified. Education was mandated. The Truce and Peace of God were evolved to moderate the ravages of war. The lives of bishops were criticized and their authority was strengthened.

**"Forth, Pilgrim, forth!
Forth, beast, out of thy stall!
Know thy country, look up,
Thank God of all.
Hold the highway, let they spirit
lead ahead.
And truth shall deliver thee and
hold no dread."
(Geoffrey Chaucer, Ballade de Bon
Conseyle)**

St. Gregory VII — He Sounded the Call for Reform

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"To me also, though unworthy and a sinner, the word of the prophet has come: 'Go up into the mountains and cry aloud! Spare not! And so, whether I will or not, casting aside all fear and all affection, I cry, I cry, and I cry again!' (Monumenta Gregoriana)

That impassioned call for reform in the life of the Church was sounded by Pope St. Gregory VII (102-85). He is frequently known by his previous name of Hildebrand. He was of humble origins, and rose to be one of the very greatest popes.

Gregory was the heir of much good work done by popes like St. Leo IX and great monasteries like Cluny. His was the honor of carrying the battle the highest and most obstructive position — the emperor himself.

"Since the day when the Church placed me on the Apostolic Throne, my whole desire, and the end of all my striving has been that the Holy Church, the Bride of God, our Mistress and our Mother, should recover her honor, and remain free, chaste, and catholic." (Monumenta Gregoriana)

The basic cause of the quarrel between Gregory VII and Henry IV of Germany was the ancient problem of Caesaro-papism, state interference in



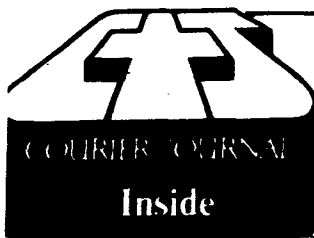
St. Gregory VII
(Art by Robert F. McGovern)

the affairs of the Church. Simony, traffic in church offices, had become commonplace. Gregory attempted to get control of the situation by forbidding anyone in Holy Orders to accept his living from the hand of a layman. The German Emperor, Henry IV, objected violently, and invaded the Papal States. Gregory responded with a sentence of deposition against Henry in 1076: "I withdraw the government of the whole kingdom of the Germans and of Italy from Henry the King."

Henry soon found himself isolated and powerless. In the winter of 1077, he appeared at the papal in Canossa, in penitential sackcloth, to beg the pardon of the Church. Gregory absolved and reinstated him — a victory for Gregory the saint, a defeat for Gregory the politician. The emperor was to have his revenge.

In 1084, Henry invaded the Papal States again, this time successfully. Gregory was forced into exile, apparently a beaten man, to die in Salerno in 1085. His last words have become a proverb: "I have loved justice and hated iniquity; therefore, I die in exile."

The good that men do lives after them, though, Christendom would not long abide the spectacle of popes and kings at war. In 1122, a new pope and a new emperor signed a concordat at Worms in Germany in which the rights of the Church are vindicated.



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