

## Chapter 1

# The Different Paths of Medieval Christianization

### *Christianity among the Rural Poor*

Medieval Europe was rural. The vast majority of Europeans who lived in the Latin West of the continent were scattered about the countryside in villages, small towns and settlements. In most regions, less than 10 per cent of the population had come to live in cities by the year 1500. This is an important fact to keep in mind when studying the developments that led up to the Reformation. Medieval Europe's rural demographics, its feudal social structure, and its minimal rates of literacy all influenced that history to an enormous degree.

There was probably no such thing as a "typical" medieval village, since their populations could vary from a few dozen to several hundred or even a thousand. Most rural communities, however, shared a number of important characteristics that remained remarkably constant over the centuries. For one thing, village economies were almost entirely agrarian. Villagers farmed the fields that surrounded their homes. Their lives were organized by the chores of the seasons: plowing, planting, cultivating, and harvesting. Winters were times to be endured, especially in places where they were long and hard, and villagers only survived them if they had stored enough grain and produce to make it through. The fortunate had livestock to help with the chores and to produce additional food. Not surprisingly, life-expectancies

were low by modern standards: few villagers could hope to live much past 40. Poor harvests, malnutrition, and vulnerability to disease kept that number low, as did additional factors such as childbirth, attacks by outsiders, or war.

Many village economies in the Middle Ages were self-sufficient and therefore isolated. Their inhabitants were subsistence farmers who produced just enough to feed themselves: grain for bread, fruit and vegetables, eggs, and occasional meat from livestock or hunting and fishing. More complex village societies included artisans, such as blacksmiths or carpenters, who played supporting roles in the economy. Beyond the village itself, trade was limited. Peasants would have produced little surplus, and communication between communities was sparse. These villagers relied on themselves. As a result, strangers were greeted with suspicion. Outsiders were not part of the village production cycle and represented additional mouths to feed, or, worse, a threat of violence or exploitation.

Some outsiders, however, had to be accepted. The most common of these were landlords. Many villagers were tenant farmers who paid rent to a landlord who often lived somewhere else and only appeared, in person or by emissary, to collect his due. In exchange, the lord offered promises of protection. The arrangement was a basic feature of feudal society, the dominant social order of medieval Europe. In such a society, peasant farmers enjoyed varying degrees of freedom. Some actually owned their own land and had no lord above them. Most, however, were subject to rental agreements and to someone who owned the land. As time went on, those agreements became more and more restrictive. Many peasants had the status of serfs; they were often tied to their landlord's land and not allowed to move. Such serfs had virtually no freedom to travel—or even to marry without the lord's approval. They paid a significant portion of their produce to the lord in rent and provided labor for the rent they could not pay. By the time of the Reformation, many contemporaries regarded serfdom as a form of slavery.

Within the village, one building towered over all the rest. It was the church. The church is fascinating for a number of reasons. For one thing, churches had no obvious utilitarian function within an agrarian economy. They did not house farmers or animals, nor did

they store grain. They mostly stood empty. Second, they were the domain of another village outsider: the priest. Priests, too, had no obvious economic function. In many cases, they acted as landlords, which meant that they had to be paid rents by those who planted on church property, and thus consumed part of the village's goods without producing anything tangible in return. Given the parameters of these societies, living on a knife's edge between subsistence and extinction, one has to wonder how it came to be that churches and clergy could exist at all in their midst. Why would these people want a church?

The answer to this question lies in a complex historical process known as Christianization. After Germanic hordes swept through Western Europe in the fifth century, destroyed the urban-centered civilization of late antiquity, and settled amidst the rubble that remained, a long process of rebuilding began. Buried among the ashes of a plundered Rome, isolated embers of thought survived. From here, and from other former cultural centers, sparks of learning spread and began to illumine, very gradually, the newly dominant barbarian peoples. The primary means of transmission was religion. Religion lends meaning to existence; it also contributes to everyday existence by identifying and communicating with the powers that determine life's trajectories. The Germans were interested in religion; some in fact were Christian, converted long before they began their westward run. Christianity, the religion of the late Roman Empire, the religion that had absorbed so much of Greek, Roman, and Jewish thought and learning, now spread to the German tribes, who had previously seen that culture mostly from afar. In so doing, Christianity became the driving force in the recultivation of Europe.

Framing the narrative in this way opens the door to a common misunderstanding. The Christianization of Europe was not simply a process that brought learning and high culture to a primitive people. For one thing, the vast majority of Europeans were illiterate and Christianity did not change that fact. Ninety-five per cent of Western Europeans remained illiterate at the time of the Reformation, which in some cases was more than a thousand years after initial Christianization. It would be a mistake, therefore, to reduce Christianity to its intellectual components, its theology, and

doctrines. Most medieval Christians had little comprehension of such things, and abstract theological discourse, aside from being exceedingly rare through much of the Middle Ages, had little direct impact on their lives. Christianity was more than learning. Christianity was a religion. It included—and inspired—intellectual activities of profound quality, but it did much more, especially for common people. It embraced their lives by bringing them into contact with a power beyond their existence in the here-and-now, and by describing that power as benevolent. While that assuaged concerns about an afterlife, it also affected their present lives. People turned to Christianity for blessings on their activities and relations, or for protection in a perilous cosmos filled with forces they could not control. Those aspects were particularly important to agrarian people, whose lives depended upon successful harvests, on finding a partner for procreation, and on protection from crop-ruining weather or plundering armies. Christianity also brought a specific ethos to medieval societies: a way of being “holy” and of following the life-example of Jesus Christ. At the very least, such values affected the way people related to each other—or, barring that, it affected the way they felt they *ought* to relate to each other.

Christianity was not simply a religion for individuals; it was an *organized* religion. From its beginnings, Christianity has had a corporate, communal dimension. Christians refer to themselves collectively as one “Body of Christ.” Much of medieval history revolved around various attempts to translate that notion of a singular body of believers into an institutional and political reality. That task was made all the more urgent by the collapse of the Roman Empire, which left Western Europe without a central or unifying political authority. By offering the concept of a “universal church,” Christianity provided an important resource in that effort. Furthermore, because the most prominent church leader of the Western Empire, the bishop of Rome, continued to reside in the former capital, a vision for a new Roman Europe, consolidated under the auspices of the church’s leadership, began to emerge. While that vision never came to full fruition, it did contribute to a long-term interweaving of religious and political institutions. There would be no “separation of church and state” in the Middle Ages. As Christianity expanded, its church organization sought to

keep pace. As it did so, it stepped into a political vacuum, assuming many of the functions of secular government. It also began to organize itself hierarchically in order to bring communities under joint regional oversight. In both cases, urban bishops were the key figures, supervising churches in their dioceses and functioning as governors in their cities. While the bishop of Rome early on claimed a unique position atop the entire hierarchy, those claims had little practical meaning before the eleventh century. Instead, Western Christianity began organizing its institutions at an intermediate level, with leadership located in a variety of centers, such as Tours, Reims, Mainz, Rome, or Canterbury.

Even from these more local vantage points, medieval Christianity remained more chaotic than united. Contemporary authors often underestimate this, either because they project a version of today's Roman Catholic church and its papal leadership onto the past, or because they take the past's papal apologists too readily at face value. Unity—however it was imagined by medieval leaders—proved elusive. That becomes increasingly evident as one considers the case of village life.

As Christianity spread through Europe, more and more villages acquired churches. Often, these were built by local lords, who also assumed rights to nominate priests (rights of patronage) and to claim a portion of the church's income, which consisted largely of tithes (10 per cent of one's earnings or produce) paid by the peasant villagers. The peasants themselves appear to have had an ambivalent attitude toward the church in their village. If complaints registered by priests are to be believed, most peasants had very little interest in organized worship—which, of course, is what the priest thought important. They did attend mass, but ignored most of the proceedings. In their view, "church" was a place for social interaction, and this did not require clergy. And so they talked during the readings and sermons, filed in and out during the liturgy, and behaved as though the priest were not present. If anything was likely to capture their attention, it was the elevation of the host at communion. The wafer—taught to be the body of Christ—was thought to radiate benevolent and protective powers. This was worth a moment's attention, and many parishioners who were busy socializing outside made sure they

were in the church in time to witness the event. Once it was over they went back to what they were doing.

Accounts such as these are many, but one should remember that they are usually written from the priests' perspective. Had one surveyed peasant parishioners, one may have heard a different story, since complaints about priests' frequent absences, negligence of duties, or onerous demands of rent and taxes were common. The fact that relations between priests and peasants were often strained does not mean that peasants were not interested in religion—or that they were only superficially Christianized, as some have argued. It simply means that many common people sought forms of religious expression that bypassed clerical control. Pilgrimages, to cite a prominent example of medieval piety, did not require clergy once they were established. Veneration of local saints, or of relics, took place outside the regular mass and was often private. Objects such as holy water, crosses, or the eucharistic host were taken out of their "proper" liturgical context and used to ward off evil spirits, bless crops, or control the weather. Clergy—and later Reformers—often criticized such practices as superstitious, but the underlying conflict is one over power and control: who has access to spiritual powers? Clergy sought to control that access on their terms, but many laypeople simply ignored those efforts and made use of Christian rites and symbols on their own. Who represented the "true" Christianity? That, in part, was at issue.

All of these factors make it difficult to speak of "the church" as a unified hierarchical institution during the Middle Ages. Even if such a hierarchy was united at the top—and as we shall see, that was seldom the case—it still needed to find a way to organize the widely scattered faithful into a coherent flock. Such institutional unity was predicated upon clerical authority and control. At the very latest, that control tended to break down at the local level, where Christians typically created their own religious programs and frequently marginalized their priests. Medieval Europe was a mission field, and Christianization was a kind of mission. As in any mission setting, the recipients of a new faith tend to appropriate it on their own terms. The results are not always what the missionaries envisioned. That was certainly the case among the

rural poor who comprised the vast majority of medieval Christians.

Nonetheless, the very fact that nearly every village came to have a church building and most people looked to that church to provide basic spiritual services such as baptism, marriage and funerals, arranged their lives according to the festivals and fasts of a Christian liturgical year, and engaged in devotional practices that in some way drew on Christian thoughts and images, points to a large-scale cultural phenomenon with more than minimal coherence. For all their obvious differences, people as far apart as Italy and Iceland still attended Easter services on the same day every year and had compatible notions of what the day was about. Even when the institutional church was in disarray, such commonalities continued. That was Christianization—and the following pages offer a brief account of how it came about.

### *Two Sides of Medieval Christianization*

Christianization refers to the process by which groups of people become Christian. Normally, this involves some form of voluntary assent to Christian truth-claims, symbols and values. Barring outright coercion, people become Christian because they are persuaded, at some level, by the new religion. Many people who become Christian—and this is true of those who inhabited early-medieval Europe—already were religious and now find themselves replacing or adapting parts of their old belief-system. Something old and familiar is replaced by something new and alien that is brought in from the outside. Accordingly, during Christianization a people's religious life becomes formed and regulated according to Christian norms and contents. Both aspects—personal persuasion and external regulation—are part of the process.

Inevitably, Christianization is a complex phenomenon. It merits a much fuller theoretical discussion than is possible here. For the present historical survey, however, a broad distinction between two sides of medieval Europe's Christianization may prove helpful. They correspond roughly to the two aspects of the process

sketched in the section “Two Sides of Medieval Christianization.” The regulative challenges were met by *institutionalization*. This included, but was by no means restricted to, the creation of a hierarchically organized institutional church. That process was not only a matter for the clergy. As we shall see, non-clerical authority figures such as kings and emperors also felt responsible for the custody and supervision of the Christian religion. In medieval Europe, Christianity’s institutionalization went hand in hand with the challenge of building and rebuilding a society. That makes it hard to distinguish between political and ecclesial agendas. If kings felt responsible for the church, it is also true that priests and bishops felt responsible for society.

The second factor has to do with the persuasiveness of Christianity. If Christianity had not seemed worthy of adoption, if it had not seemed attractive and compelling on a personal level, it would not have spread. Coercion would not have sufficed (though, as always, there were some who thought it might). As it happened, one factor seemed particularly important for this development: *the moral and spiritual integrity of those who brought the message*. In many cases, these people were monks. It was they, more than any other representative of the church, who exemplified in their own lives what it meant to follow Christ, both on an individual and on a communal level. They presented a pattern of what a life of holiness, a Christ-like life, could look like—and their example proved inspiring. Without monks, and without their monastic ethos, there would have been no Christianization. The institutional church would have had far less credibility. This, then, is the other side of the process.

Christianity flourished when both factors—institutionalization and a compelling spiritual example—were united. Regrettably, that was not always the case. Tied as it was to the rebuilding of European society, Christian institutionalization made use of power structures that, by their very nature, were “worldly” and often indistinguishable from those of secular or even non-Christian political life. Subjugated peoples were no more likely to respect an urban bishop acting as local governor than they were a local governor who had no relationship to the church. That was all the more true if such urban bishops draped themselves with



the usual secular accoutrements of wealth and power that, in their eyes, were necessary to communicate “status” (and made life more pleasant to boot). If, moreover, those same bishops preached sermons about renouncing the world and serving Christ in humility, the combination could not help but seem hypocritical. Who would believe such a man?

Such situations arose often as Europe was rebuilt after the fall of Rome. Through his conversion in 312, and subsequent rise to power as Emperor of Rome, Constantine the Great had established state sponsorship of the Christian religion. This not only allowed Christianity to move out of its minority niche, it also designated properties as belonging to the church, thereby setting an important, if controversial precedent. While that sponsorship ended in the West after the Empire’s decline, it was revived, at first on a more local level, by the Frankish kings. Beginning with Clovis (c. 466–511), whose conversion account mirrors that of Constantine in many ways, royal support of the Catholic faith and its institutions returned.

The interconnectedness of ecclesial and temporal powers took several forms. In cities that had long served as episcopal residences, the bishop in many cases remained the most significant person of authority after the empire’s disintegration. As the Franks established new administrative structures in their kingdoms, those bishops served in both a secular and religious role, at the same time governor and pastoral supervisor. The ambiguity resulting from such arrangements was exacerbated by the wealth and property that the bishops accrued.

The very notion that the church could own property remained problematic. Legally, there was the question—not fully clear from precedents in Roman law—of *who*, exactly, the owner in such cases was. Some deeds designated Jesus Christ; others mentioned individual saints. Even if one conceived of a corporate identity defined as “the church,” there still remained questions of who acted on behalf of that church. In practice, bishops felt that they did. That assumption was often contested by lords and kings, however, and such conflicts permeate the entire era.

The situation was even less clear in rural regions. Here, most churches were built and maintained by local lords. Those lords

understandably felt that they owned that church. They nominated and paid the clergy; they retained a portion of the parish income. In principle, all of this required approval by a bishop, but that had little impact on the day-to-day workings of these so-called “proprietary churches” under a lord’s control. The priest was, for all practical purposes, a subject of his landlord. At the same time, the priest drew a portion of the parish’s income himself. That placed him in a social position above that of the peasants whose rents and taxes helped support him.

Politically, even the wealthiest Frankish bishops had to face the reality that their king guaranteed the viability of their claims and protected them from outside aggression. They were dependents of the king. That dependency was all the more obvious when the church did not own properties outright, but received property rights from a lord or king. The transfer of such rights was typically accompanied by a ritual known as “investiture.” This was not the same as consecration, by which the bishop received his spiritual authority from other bishops, but it was significant nonetheless. In investiture, the king solemnly handed the bishop symbols of authority—a ring and staff—and said the words *accipe ecclesiam*, or “accept this church.” That effectively made the bishop a vassal to the king. He now owed fealty to his worldly superior, and in turn exercised land-owning privileges over all those who, by living on “his” land, became his worldly subjects. In this way, clergy were integrated into the feudal system. If Christianity had a long history of placing itself over and against “the world,” that notion now became harder to maintain. The church was a full participant in the world, a player with a vested interest in, rather than a critic of, feudal realities.

Defenders of this development argued that the church needed material resources to carry out its mission in the world. A major part of that work had always been care for the poor. In some cases, income derived from properties did in fact go toward supporting the poor and the sick. In many cases, it stayed with the bishops or other clerical elite. Such developments generated criticism, much of which arose from within the church. The emergence of powerful monastic movements bore witness to that critical moment. The most celebrated pope of the early Middle

Ages, Gregory I, “the Great” (c. 540–604), was famous in large part because, as a former monk, he took his monastic values into office. One of the few early bishops of Rome whose pastoral charisms filled the idea of a “pope” with real meaning, Gregory preferred his monk’s habit to expensive garments and called himself “servant of servants” as a sign of the humility that he felt belonged to the office.

The fact that Gregory’s example still resonated nearly a thousand years later with Reformers such as Luther who otherwise had little sympathy for the papacy says something about the quality that monastic values lent to church offices. It also reminds us that Gregory was an exception. Given the connection of high church offices with wealth and property, they tended to attract a very different sort of man. Becoming a bishop was a smart career move for scions of the local aristocracy—and that applied in Rome as much as anywhere. This meant that, despite prominent and influential counter-examples such as Gregory, bishops as a whole were seldom potent instruments of Christianization.

A far more significant counterbalance to the worldliness of early medieval clergy came not from Rome, but from the Celtic outskirts of the British Isles. Irish and Scottish monks had developed a distinctive Christian culture far away from the tumultuous continent. Its polity was organized not around episcopal dioceses, but around monastic abbeys, which functioned as centers of spiritual life and learning. They also served as sources of missionary activity. Aside from rigorous “askesis” (self-denial and discipline practiced to heighten spiritual focus), these Celtic monks cultivated a practice known as *peregrinatio*, or wandering. Renouncing the comforts and security of a fixed home, they left their communities to go out into an often hostile world and evangelize. In that fashion, the Irish monk Columba (521–597), one of the best-known of these early figures, left his homeland to establish a monastery on the island of Iona, thereby helping to introduce Christianity to Scotland. His countryman Columbanus (543–615) went even further, gathering a small group of fellow-missionaries and leaving his monastery in Bangor, Ireland, for France. Divided into several kingdoms, much of France was nominally Christian when Columbanus arrived around 585, but the state of its

churches was deplorable. Corruption among the clergy had helped undermine Christianity's credibility and eroded the religion's foothold in the Frankish kingdoms. Columbanus counteracted this by circumventing the established church and by securing the support of a king—the King of Burgundy—rather than that of a bishop. Based in a monastery provided by the monarch, Columbanus and his fellow monks began a wide-ranging ministry to the surrounding areas. The rigor and authenticity of their example and the depths of their spirituality proved compelling. Attracting countless visitors from far and wide, the Celtic monks launched a revival of Christianity in Burgundy and beyond. This set a number of important precedents.

For one thing, the Celtic monastic missions continued. Columbanus himself moved across the Alps to Italy late in life and established an influential monastery in Bobbio, between Milan and Genoa. He also left a monastic rule that stood alongside Benedict's for two centuries. His friend and disciple, Ursicinus (d. 625), founded a mission in Switzerland. Other Irish missionary-monks included Kilian (640–689), who left Ireland for Franconia and evangelized part of modern-day Germany before he was beheaded by a German noblewoman's henchmen; and Virgilius (c. 700–784) who traveled from Ireland to Salzburg, where he eventually became bishop. Celtic influence also extended to England, from whence a second movement swept eastward to the continent. Willibrord (c. 658–739) and Suitbert (d. 713) went from Northumbria to evangelize Frisia and today's Netherlands. They were joined by the better-known Boniface (c. 672–754), who departed from England for France and, together with the Carolingian kings and their armies, launched a large-scale Christianization of Saxon Germany. Boniface, who became the first Archbishop of Mainz, was later martyred while seeking to convert hostile Frisians.

In addition to their mission work itself, the northern monks brought a new kind of polity to continental churches. The Roman model of church organization was diocesan. It consisted of geographic areas (dioceses) whose churches were supervised centrally by a bishop. As already mentioned, the Celtic churches favored a non-diocesan structure in which abbeys served as spiritual centers.

This was the model Columbanus and his followers brought to France. Given the weakness of the Frankish bishops, the monks' ability to bypass episcopal jurisdiction—and interference—was important to their success. Needless to say, bishops were not enthusiastic about the presence of an alternate polity in their territories because it created churches that were both exempt from their supervision and beyond their financial reach. Bishops worked hard to reverse that process and to integrate the abbeys into their dioceses, and the issue remained contentious for centuries to come.

Celtic piety also left a lasting imprint on the face of medieval Christianity. Its powerful ascetic ethos, promoting poverty, chastity, and humility, was spelled out in *The Rule of Columbanus* and set the tone for monastic discipline. Monks embodied a readily identifiable lifestyle of "holiness." On top of that, many monks became martyrs, laying down their lives in the mission field. All of this heightened the respect they earned in a land on the cusp of Christianization. To a society whose pagan memories remained fresh, monks fit a familiar religious category: they were "holy men." They may have been different from the holy men of pre-Christian times, but they were much easier to identify in these terms than were bishops, who resembled government officials more than anything obviously holy. The numerous accounts of miracles and other legends that attached to the Celtic missionary monks testify to the impression they made in their day.

It was the Celtic practice of private confession and penance, however, that affected medieval devotional life most directly. While some form of ritualized confession and penance had been practiced in the ancient church, it eroded almost entirely under the rapid coarsening of moral standards in post-imperial, Germanic Europe. Early medieval authors such as Gregory of Tours (538–594) paint a dire picture of a society dominated by violence and brutality, economies based on plunder and corruption, and justice executed through vengeance and vendettas. Aside from "a few sincere ascetics and a small minority of respectable clergy," church leaders were no less degenerate than society as a whole, and therefore ill-positioned to impose Christian discipline. The Celtic missionaries, on the other hand, had developed a detailed system of penance to support their robust notions of moral discipline. Less

interested in building institutional bureaucracy than they were in reforming a society from individual to individual, the northern monks placed their emphasis on private, rather than public, confession and penance. Confession was secret. It was made to a suitable person who was generally, but not necessarily a priest. Confessors, who occasionally included ascetic women, were spiritual guides, or “soul friends” according to Irish tradition.

Acts of penance that the confessor assigned after confession were also private, though not always secret, particularly if they also involved some form of satisfaction to an injured party. The monks developed manuals for penance and circulated them once they arrived on the continent. These handbooks stipulate penalties for a wide variety of transgressions, ranging from murder and theft to sexual offenses, perjury, and heresy. They typically distinguish between clergy and laypeople, assigning different degrees of guilt—and punishment—to each. Penalties usually involve fasting, which typically means a diet of bread and water only. So, for example, the *Penitential of Columban*, written around 600, assigns one year of penance for theft, two for masturbation, and anywhere from three to 10 or more years for murder. Sodomy committed by a priest resulted in 10 years’ penance, while lay sodomy incurred only seven. Penalties for fornication depended in part on the degree of social disruption caused by the offense: if a man slept with an unmarried widow, he did one year; violating a girl brought two years plus compensation to her parents; impregnating another man’s wife incurred three years, during which the offender not only fasted, but abstained from relations with his own wife and made restitution to the cuckold; the penalty for sex between unmarried persons was marriage.

As several of these examples illustrate, penance was often coupled with satisfaction, that is, with restitution or compensation to the injured party. This was particularly important for a mission context, which aimed not only at disciplining individual conduct, but also at reshaping society as a whole. While penance healed the soul, satisfaction mended relationships. It also paved the way for the penitent’s eventual reconciliation with the church. Successful penance ended with re-admission to communion, which, particularly in a parish setting, has social implications since religious and

secular communities are largely identical. The mission context of these handbooks is also evident in their efforts to incorporate values of local pre-Christian cultures. An obvious case involves Germanic notions of *wergeld*, or “blood money,” according to which every person’s life had a “price.” Penalties for killing someone could be reduced and even eliminated if the killer paid the victim’s family the appropriate price. Such practices were retained by many of the penitential guides, which lessened the time of penance when blood money was paid. While these concessions to local sensibilities probably broadened the guidebooks’ impact, they also created dangerous ambiguities for penitential practice by suggesting that relief of penance could somehow be “bought.”

Fascinating as these catalogues of penitential penalties are, it is important to remember that they served merely as practical guidelines, not as codes of law. They were meant to assist confessors in their tasks. As a result, there is a good deal of variety among the handbooks, and while the basic pattern is similar, specific penalties are far from consistent. Far more important than the lists themselves was the underlying relationship that confession established between penitents and a confessor. This was the key ingredient of the process. The role of a “soul friend,” or spiritual mentor, became central to this approach to religious reform. In the early stages of the Celtic missions, that person was likely to be an ascetic monk, a man—or in some cases a woman—whose personal example had the power to inspire. Ultimately, the aim of such mentoring lay in changing the attitudes and values of a society so that un-Christian behavior would be less likely to arise. “True penance,” begins the *Penitential of Columban*, “is to refrain from committing deeds for which penance is to be done.”

As the new form of penance spread, it sparked bitter controversies between the Celtic monks and Frankish church leaders. Bishops, fearing a subversion of their own influence, opposed the new practices vehemently and used all of their institutional power to suppress them. A long and acrimonious conflict between episcopal and monastic visions for church life ensued. After several centuries, though, even bishops came to recognize the value of private confession and sought to give it greater institutional grounding. Confession was defined as a church sacrament,

declared valid only if performed by an ordained priest, and, in 1215, made mandatory for all Christians. The penalties, too, were institutionalized, progressing from the informally compiled Celtic handbooks into universal standards of canon law.

Private confession's journey into the institutional church highlights important aspects of early-medieval Christianization. Emerging from the rubble of post-Roman Europe, Christian leaders worked to build institutions that could organize and regulate the society they sought to convert. To do so, they wedded themselves to the feudal political structures that arose at the same time, thereby acquiring property, wealth, and social influence. That came with a price, however: a worldliness that compromised many of the basic values of their faith. The fact that Christianity grew nonetheless was thanks to the efforts of wandering monks from the North who embodied a different and more recognizably "Christian" ethos. As their arguments over the status of abbeys and private confession show, the two forces found themselves in frequent conflict. On a purely abstract level, such conflicts—between the institutional and the innovative, between form and content—are probably eternal. In the history of Western Christianity, however, they were partially resolved during the eleventh century, when monastic innovators became a driving force in the church's institutional life.

### *The Rise of the Papacy: Centralization and Reform*

*Libertas ecclesiae!*—"freedom of the church!"—was the battle cry of an eleventh-century reform movement that changed the face of Western Christianity. It was this movement, dedicated to "liberating" the institutional church from secular influences, that also created an effective papacy.

The notion of a "pope" at the top of the church's hierarchy was nothing new. Ancient Christianity had five patriarchs—the bishops of Jerusalem, Antioch, Constantinople, Alexandria, and Rome—whose authority surpassed that of all the other bishops. The see of Rome, drawing on a history that included two apostles, Peter and Paul, as well as on its cultural status, periodically



claimed preeminence among the five and tried to assert a universal authority, but those attempts were rebuffed. The Council of Chalcedon (451), one of the definitive gatherings of the early church, formally rejected Rome's claims of primacy and accorded "equal privileges" to Constantinople. Bishop Leo of Rome declined to accept the council's decree, and the conflict caused a lasting estrangement between the churches of the Greek East and the Latin West. Within the West, Rome had less direct competition. Had the city produced better bishops, Rome's preeminence in this part of Europe may have been more meaningful before 1050. As it was, the notion of a universal bishop residing in Rome was significant mainly as an idea.

Even that idea had its challengers, however. Authority over the church lay in more than one pair of hands before the eleventh century. The most obvious obstacle to universal church leadership (in the West) was political disunity. Political rule was concentrated locally. Kings and dukes controlled a patchwork of individual territories, and they saw themselves as custodians of the churches within those lands. There was a strong set of precedents for such a view. Because their personal conversions effectively "converted" their subjects, too, both Emperor Constantine and later Clovis, king of the Franks, understood themselves as leaders of God's people—and therefore of the church. It was they who convened church councils, for example, and set the tone for important decisions of doctrine and polity. Clovis did this deliberately, convoking the First of Council of Orléans in 511, which established the king as head of the Frankish church and gave him the right to name bishops within his kingdom. Other regions across Western Europe followed similar patterns and saw the emergence of largely independent Christian cultures not only in Gaul, but on the British Isles, in Visigoth Spain, in parts of Italy, and eventually across Germany and Scandinavia. Even at the most local level, rural lords built and oversaw their "own" proprietary churches.

Royal leadership of the church was particularly notable during the Carolingian Age of the eighth and ninth centuries. Two incidents are emblematic of the relations between Frankish monarchs and the papacy during this period. In 751, Pepin the Younger (or "the Short," 714–768) was crowned King of the Franks, inaugurating

the “Carolingian” dynasty (named after Pepin’s father, Charles Martel). Elected by the Frankish nobility, Pepin was anointed by a bishop, underscoring the sacral character of the king’s rule. In addition, Pope Stephen II, needing Pepin’s military support to protect Rome from attacking Lombards, made the long journey to Paris to consecrate him again—the first time a pope consecrated a king. The pope also named Pepin and his sons *Patricius Romanorum* (“Patrician of the Romans”), placing the city under Carolingian protection. In return, Pepin mobilized his armies to defeat the Lombards and then “donated” the liberated territories to the pope. Though the precise terms of “Pepin’s Donation” remain obscure, the agreement laid the foundation for papal rule over the Italian territories that were known as the “Papal States.” At the time, it also demonstrated the pope’s political and military dependence on the Carolingian king.

Pepin’s son Charlemagne (c. 742–814) signaled the pope’s secondary stature even more forcefully. Famous for his vast expansion of the Frankish kingdom, Charlemagne, who read assiduously church fathers such as Augustine, also implemented wide-ranging reforms of the churches in his growing domain. Liturgy, prayers, and church administration were overhauled under his custody. It was he, not the pope, who enforced liturgical consistency in the realm. On Christmas Day, 800, Charlemagne became more than a Frankish king: he was crowned Emperor of the Romans—reviving the idea of a Western Empire and setting the cornerstone for the office of Holy Roman Emperor. Charlemagne saw himself as crowned by God. The agent acting on God’s behalf was the pope, who placed the crown on the new emperor’s head and afterwards knelt before his ruler in a gesture of submission. Later popes would interpret the event differently, emphasizing their right to crown emperors rather than their submissiveness, but at the time, the message was clear. As a letter by Charlemagne to Pope Leo III declares, the emperor would defend, guide, and reform the church—and the pope would be his assistant.

Medieval kings understood themselves as religious figures and therefore as natural heads of their churches. Both modern-day notions of secular government and the separation of church and state, as well as the anti-royalist polemic of the eleventh-century reformers tend to obscure that. In their own minds, however,

medieval kings thought it was perfectly appropriate for the church to be governed by a monarch rather than by a priest. After all, that is how things were in biblical times under Kings David and Solomon. Drawing on such scriptural precedents, medievals developed notions of sacral kingship. Kings did not simply take the crown, they were anointed in an act of consecration. One of the most eloquent formulations of this principle came in a series of treatises known as the *Norman Anonymous*, or *Anonymous of York*. Written during the heat of the royal vs. papal polemics around 1100, it articulates a longstanding position of royal church governance:

By divine authority and the institution of the holy fathers, kings in God's church are ordained and consecrated at the sacred altar with holy unction and benediction, that they may have authority to rule a Christian people..., i.e. God's Holy Church. [...] When kings are consecrated, they receive the power to rule this body: to rule it, to confirm it in judgment and justice, and to organize it according to the system of Christian law. (O'Donovan and O'Donovan, 1999: 252)

Like most medievals, the *Norman Anonymous* envisions a hierarchically organized church. That hierarchy includes bishops and priests. At the top of the order, however, stands the king—to whom all bishops and priests are subject.

The royalist authors reject a competing intellectual position, one that was similarly ancient. In a widely read letter to the East Roman Emperor in 494, Bishop Gelasius of Rome made a distinction between ways in which the world is ruled: by the authority of consecrated priests, and by the power of kings. Of these, the former is preeminent because it deals with matters of salvation. Consequently, kings need to subordinate themselves “in religious matters” to the authority of priests. The letter gave rise to a “two swords” theory of government that was highly influential throughout the Middle Ages. The theory draws on Augustine's distinction between spiritual and worldly things, assigning priority to the spiritual as the greater good. In *City of God*, Augustine develops this distinction further by describing a heavenly “City of

God” and an earthly “City of Man.” While Augustine does not connect those two literary “cities” with concrete types of government, some of his medieval interpreters did. In their eyes, the heavenly city represented the church; it was to be ruled by men versed in spiritual matters. The earthly city was the realm of kings. This dualism is what tracts like that of the anonymous author of *York* reject. They take issue with the notion that human existence can be separated into “spiritual” and “bodily” components, each with its own ruler, “as though souls could be ruled without bodies and bodies without souls!”

Philosophically, the debate is fascinating in its own right. It did not, however, take place in a vacuum. Given the worldliness of so many medieval bishops, it seems remarkable that they would employ Gelasius’s Augustinianism to make a case for their distinctiveness. They were not very distinctive. But that is precisely why the “two-swords theory” was so attractive: there was an urgent *need* to define a recognizably spiritual priestly class. In that sense, it was a matter of self-protection, of maintaining some theoretical hold on what it meant to be a priest in such a gray-shaded City of Men. Cynics could argue that it was also a matter of self-deception. There is some truth to that. But in the hands of a reformer, theory can be a powerful tool. Deep change sometimes requires a City of God, if only as a goal.

Not surprisingly, the eleventh-century road to reform was laid by monks. It began 100 years earlier in a Benedictine abbey in Cluny, France, from whence a powerful wave of spiritual and liturgical reform swept across much of Western Europe. Initially driven by a desire to restore ascetic discipline and strict adherence to the Rule of Benedict within monasteries, the Cluniac Reform movement soon inspired countless Christians in non-monastic settings, as well. In order to further their reform agenda, the Cluniacs took what turned out to be an enormously significant step: they insisted on exemption from supervision by their local bishops and made themselves accountable directly to the pope. This, of course, revived an age-old conflict, present since the arrival of Irish monks in France more than 300 years earlier. Because bishops so often were enmeshed in the machinery of worldly rulers and interests, the monks viewed them as an impediment to

reform. In this case, they went over the bishops' heads and sought support from the pope.

The problem with this scheme lay in the poor quality of the Roman popes. If papal support were to have any meaning, the popes needed to be able to command respect. And because popes had no armies, that respect could not be won by force. Instead, a moral integrity needed to attach itself to the office. This happened in two ways. The first was luck. The reformers profited from a coincidence: Henry III, German king and Holy Roman Emperor, was a deeply religious man who happened to support the Cluniac agenda. He was also the most powerful man in Europe. When the papal throne became vacant in 1048, Henry used his influence to nominate a suitable successor. His choice, Bruno of Eguisheim (1002–1054), soon to become Pope Leo IX, was a stroke of genius. Leo was a truly great pope.

Leo IX quickly convened synods in Rome, passing sharp decrees against clerical abuses. More importantly, he followed up these efforts by traveling outside of Rome and calling together councils in France and Germany that promulgated similar decrees. This was an effective way of establishing the pope's authority over the larger church. The fact that it found widespread support had as much to do with the strength of Leo's character as it did with the popularity of the reforms themselves. Leo died in 1054, but his legacy was profound. Wisely, he had called other reformers to Rome and made them cardinals, giving that office considerably more substance than it had hitherto shown. From the ranks of those cardinals, the drive to reform now accelerated.

The second part of the reform effort targeted the process of papal succession. One of the greatest weaknesses in the office came from its vulnerability to political influence. Without a clear procedure for appointing successors, papal vacancies were met with unseemly wrangling and maneuvering by a whole range of parties with a stake in the outcome. These included prominent Roman families, bishops, and kings and emperors. To avoid this, and to minimize such influence, the reformers drafted a new set of rules for papal election. They made it an inner-church process. Considering that none of the reformers would have been in Rome without Henry's appointment of Leo IX, there is a certain irony to

this. But royal “interference” was not always so beneficial. In fact, since both Henry and Leo died before their agenda was secure, the reformers came under considerable pressure from opponents eager to name a more malleable successor to the papal throne. The future of the movement therefore depended on a speedy conclusion to electoral reform. This came in 1059, when Pope Nicholas II promulgated a decree on papal election. The decree established a “college of cardinals,” consisting of specially appointed Roman clergy, as the primary electoral body. From here on, cardinals elected the pope. Even if the process still contained an opportunity for “the people” to voice their assent, it was now firmly in the hands of the elite clergy who were most familiar with the office. As the decree states: “The most eminent churchmen shall be the leaders in carrying out the election of a pope, the others followers” (Tierney, 1988: 42).

To reformers interested in “liberating” the church from control by secular rulers, this was their project’s cornerstone. The papacy had become “free,” and, equipped with a newfound moral authority, could now begin a process of reforming the church with the reins of centralized leadership. Using papal election reform as a model, the reformers sought to apply the same standards to the appointments of all other clergy. The principle, spelled out in further legislation of 1059, was clear: no more influence by laypeople: “That no cleric or priest shall receive a church from laymen in any fashion, whether freely or at a price” (Tierney, 1988: 44). That, simply put, amounted to a political revolution. Given the enormous diversity of church polities in the Latin West, and the deep entanglement of clergy in the web of dependencies that made up feudal society, calling for an end to lay investiture was an extraordinarily bold and assertive step. Implicitly, it was an indictment of the feudal system itself, suggesting that the church, in order to be spiritually pure, had to be free of feudal loyalties. Priests would not be beholden to laypeople; they would be subject only to one Lord: Jesus Christ. In practice, of course, they would also be subject to the Lord’s earthly representative, the pope; but even that was a radical departure from the feudal world.

One sees in these reform efforts the imprint of a monastic ethos. When eleventh-century reformers such as Leo IX, or Hildebrand

of Sovana (c. 1020–1085), his most influential assistant and later successor as Pope Gregory VII, spoke of liberating the church from lay influence, they did not just want to make it vaguely more spiritual, they sought to make it specifically more monastic. Most members of the circle had been influenced by Cluny, including Hildebrand, who was a Benedictine monk and had spent time in Cluny. When he took the name Gregory VII, he claimed the spiritual mantle of the most celebrated monk-pope of all: Gregory the Great. Convinced as they were by the value of life in the monastery, these men built their reform efforts (often called “Gregorian reforms”) on a desire to make all the clergy more monk-like and more recognizably “holy” in comportment. A basic distinction between “clergy” and “laymen” was one part of that program. Another targeted two of the medieval clergy’s most blatant moral abuses: simony and concubinage. Simony is the sale of spiritual services and, more specifically, church offices. Leo’s circle was not the first to outlaw such practices, but they hoped that putting an end to lay investiture would diminish the opportunities for financial corruption that made simony so attractive.

Concubinage meant living with a “concubine,” or common-law wife. While continence—abstaining from sexual intercourse—was not formally required of clergy until the twelfth century, it seemed an appropriate part of ascetic discipline and was strongly encouraged by some church leaders much earlier. It proved difficult to enforce, however, and hypocrisy became common as clergy claimed celibacy while carrying on relationships with women whom they did not marry (that is, “concubines”). Others married openly. This, too, was criticized and earned the pejorative term “Nicolaitism.” Aside from the social disruption concubinage caused—such as the uncertain status of the women and the production of illegitimate offspring—sexual relationships of any kind contradicted the ascetic ethos of the Gregorian reformers. If priests were to become more monk-like, they could not have sex.

The reform movement’s success was mixed. Curbing concubinage and simony proved difficult. Even after clerical celibacy was made a legal requirement at the Second Lateran Council in 1139, most priests ignored it. Throughout the centuries leading

up to the Reformation, even bishops and popes kept concubines, and most rural villagers would have been surprised to find a priest without a common-law wife. Simony, too, continued, along with a wide range of related financial corruption, and ranked at the top of the agenda at every council for the remaining Middle Ages.

More successful were efforts to create a potent papacy. Along with the pope's increased status came a considerable rise in political influence—not only over bishops and clergy, but over kings and princes, as well. In fact, by the time of Gregory VII's pontificate, one could argue that the reformers' original motto of "free the church" had mutated into something more like "rule the world." Popes began stylizing themselves as monarchs. They let themselves be crowned; their installation was referred to as "enthronement"; they assembled a court of advisors and bureaucrats, known as the "curia"; and they commissioned legates to travel abroad as their representatives and enforcers. Popes did indeed serve as temporal rulers over the Papal States of central Italy, but their political ambitions had grown much larger.

A list of 27 propositions ascribed to Gregory VII appeared in 1075, and reveals how far papal thinking had moved in this direction. Known as the *Dictatus Papae*, the document makes a case of unprecedented strength for papal supremacy. Arguing "that the Roman Church was founded by God alone" and "that the Roman Pontiff alone is rightly to be called universal," *Dictatus Papae* builds a case for centralizing authority in Rome, and for subjugating worldly rulers to the pope. The pope alone may "enact new laws according to the needs of the time," "he alone may use the imperial insignia," "the Pope is the only one whose feet are to be kissed by all princes," and he "may depose Emperors." A pope had the power to name bishops and other clergy "of any church he may wish"—thereby expanding his episcopal jurisdiction beyond his own diocese and over the universal church (Tierney, 1988: 49–50).

Significantly, the document maintains that only popes be allowed to convoke synods and councils. The pope also claimed ultimate authority over truth: "He himself may be judged by no one," "no sentence of his may be retracted by anyone," and "no chapter or book may be regarded as canonical without his authority." Against



this background comes a remarkable dogmatic assertion: “That the Roman Church has never erred, nor ever, by the witness of Scripture, shall err to all eternity.” Rome’s effort to centralize ecclesial authority comes in the next-to-last statement: “That he should not be considered as Catholic who is not in conformity with the Roman Church.” Its political ambitions come in the last: “That the pope may absolve subjects of unjust men from their fealty.” Kings may have been prepared to ignore most of *Dictatus Papae*’s claims, but this last one contained a powerful threat. If one’s feudal subjects really believed that the pope could absolve them from their oaths of fealty then one papal pronouncement would undercut an entire political order. A king could no longer rule. While papal apologists might argue that *Dictatus Papae* was interested in advancing justice (after all, only *unjust* rulers would be deposed), most secular rulers read the document with a stronger sense of realism. In their eyes, it was about claiming power—at their expense.

Statements such as *Dictatus Papae* reveal another side to the eleventh-century developments. More clearly than ever before, “the church” is here defined as a papal institution (that is, “the Roman Church”). Rome decides who its members are; Rome decides where its boundaries lie. Significantly, that attempted monopoly is meant to exclude competing notions of sacral kingship. Kings and princes are dismissed as “laypeople,” as far removed from clergy as were peasants. This conception of “the church” introduced a basic dualism: it existed over and against “the world.” The dualism itself is not new—Christianity had long operated with variations of this same theme—but it was now being filled with very specific contents. “The church” meant the papally-led institution. Non-clergy belonged to this “church” only insofar as they participated in the institution’s sacraments—and access to those sacraments was governed by clergy. As time would tell, that new definition of the church had political implications. It also had challengers.

The strongest opponent of Gregory’s ambitions was King Henry IV of Germany. Lay investiture was the issue that focused their conflict. In Henry’s eyes, if Gregory succeeded in prohibiting lay investiture then the pope would indeed have taken an enormous step toward subverting royal power. He therefore opposed those

efforts and continued his practice of investing bishops. Their struggle lasted years and precipitated a Europe-wide battle of propaganda. An initial standoff, during which Gregory excommunicated the king, was resolved at the castle of Canossa, in northern Italy, in 1077; Henry assumed the attitude of a penitent and was reinstated. While propagandists portrayed this as a victory for the pope, the conflict in fact continued. Prohibitions against lay investiture increased at local levels, but lay rulers also retained many of their traditional prerogatives. Henry even recovered enough strength to invade Rome in 1080, and appoint an anti-pope to Gregory. Gregory had to flee the city and later died in exile.

Despite such turbulence, however, the papacy had achieved a remarkable rise to power. Prior to Gregory VII, no pope had confronted a king in this fashion. Even if the outcome remained something of a stalemate, the papacy had established itself as a serious player on the field of European politics. A century later, during the reign of the brilliant Pope Innocent III, monarchs truly were inclined to kiss the pontiff's feet.

Under the aegis of robust central leadership, Western Christianity attained an entirely new level of institutionalization. The popes of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries solidified their control over the institutional church by several means. Creating a canonical process for electing popes gave the papacy a more secure legal footing. While outside influence continued and even produced an astonishing number of anti-popes during the twelfth century, having a legal standard in place gave the papal party an important resource to survive those conflicts. Intertwined with the politics of papal elections were territorial claims over the Papal States, the lands in central Italy over which the pope had temporal jurisdiction. During the course of the twelfth century, papal dominion over these states, contested by other rulers and resented by many Romans, stabilized, providing a measure of security for the Roman see. An assertive system of church taxes extended the papacy's financial reach over most of Western Europe. This, too, contributed to centralization of power both symbolically and in the unmistakable "hard" form of cold currency.

Canon law was perhaps the most significant tool used to establish a centralized church administration. Animated by the Gregorian

reformers, as well as by the rediscovery of Roman civil law, church lawyers and other scholars began compiling collections of papal decrees, both past and present, and arranging them systematically in law books for the church. A milestone in that development came with the twelfth-century Bolognese jurist Gratian's *Decretum*. Gratian's collection lay the foundation for the *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, a body of texts that, continually expanded, would remain in use until it was replaced by a simplified codex in 1917—nearly 800 years after Gratian's initial recension. Canon law enabled the papacy to govern in an unprecedented way. There was now one set of laws for all the Western churches. Importantly, those laws came from Rome. The pope was the final judge in matters of church law. He was also the direct source of many laws, since the collections preserved papal decrees. This ensured that a pope's pronouncements could be both disseminated broadly and applied for years to come. Aside from increasing the pope's power considerably, the establishment of centralized canon law carried the promise of strengthening church discipline. It gave substance to the idea of a universal church.

While most popes stayed near Rome, they used two instruments to execute power in other regions. The first was the papal legate. These men represented the pope, traveling to places where he wished to make his presence felt and outranking all the local church authorities upon arrival. For this reason they were seldom popular, but often effective. The second tool proved even more problematic. It was the council. As *Dictatus Papae* indicates, part of the papal reform effort made sure that only popes could henceforth convoke councils—not kings, as had been the case in previous centuries. Between 1123 and 1215, there were four such councils in the Lateran Palace, where the pope resided in Rome. Three more took place in France over the next century. They were important politically as well as for legislative purposes. The most significant of the medieval councils, the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, called by Innocent III, enacted wide-ranging reforms of church life, including the requirement that all Christians attend the eucharist at least once a year, preceded by confession. Since councils gathered representatives from many geographic areas, their influence could radiate widely when those

people returned home—presumably taking the council’s pronouncements with them.

Closer to the heart of church life lay the pope’s authority over sacraments. Most medieval Christians had no personal contact with popes, but many experienced this side of the pope’s office at least indirectly. There were three ways a pope’s disciplinary will could impact a person’s sacramental life: *excommunication* prohibited an individual from receiving communion and in severe cases (*e. major*) banned that person from church attendance; *interdict* was generally applied to places rather than individuals and prohibited entire regions or countries from receiving the sacraments; *suspension* applied to clergy and forbade their administering the sacraments and providing pastoral services. In addition to regulating access to the sacraments, popes had another tool at their disposal: they could render feudal rulers powerless by unbinding their subjects from oaths of fealty. If that proved insufficient, they could follow up with a formal deposition. During their struggles with the Empire and other European powers, popes made liberal use of all of these measures. In some cases, they combined them. Between 1207 and 1215, Pope Innocent III displayed his full arsenal: He placed an interdict over the entire kingdom of England, excommunicated King John, and freed the king’s subjects from their fealty. After lifting these measures and restoring John to power, Innocent suspended the archbishop of Canterbury for his role in advancing the Magna Carta.

### *The Papacy’s Decline*

Innocent’s pontificate marked the high point of papal power. From here began a long decline from which the office never fully recovered. Less than a century after Innocent’s death in 1215, the popes gave up their residence in Rome and moved to Avignon, France. Eventually, efforts to restore the Roman papacy led to the election of two simultaneous popes, one in Rome, the other in Avignon. Both were elected canonically by the same college of cardinals, and each attracted his own group of supporters across the continent. Christendom was divided. Initially an instrument of unity, the papacy had now become a cause of division.

Even at its apex, the papacy never headed a “universal church.” In 1054, shortly after the death of Leo IX, mutual excommunications split Rome and Constantinople, sealing a centuries-long process of cultural estrangement. The Christian East had always rejected the pope’s claims to primacy. Now, with the “Great Western Schism” (1378–1417) that pitted Rome against Avignon, the West was divided within itself, pope vs. pope, obedience vs. obedience. For a short time there were even three competing popes—the third elected in Pisa. After the Council of Constance finally resolved the crisis in 1417 by causing the removal of all three popes and electing a new one, the papacy’s image was badly damaged. Its supporters worked frenetically to restore papal authority over the following century, but the pope’s position remained insecure atop an institution that had developed a taste for alternatives. The sixteenth-century Reformation made good on those alternatives—and put an end to the dream of universal pontifical rule. Even in the West, there would now always be Christians who belonged to churches without a pope.

The papacy’s decline went hand in hand with its increased worldliness. Paradoxically, efforts to “free” the church from secular governance made the church’s own governance appear more secular. As kings were shouldered aside, popes themselves began behaving more like kings. The monastic spirit that had fueled eleventh-century reform was largely lost along the way. Tellingly, whereas Gregory VII had been a monk, major thirteenth-century popes such as Innocent III, Innocent IV, and Boniface VIII were lawyers and aristocrats.

If the initial cries for a “free church” contained an implicit critique of feudal society, by the end of the thirteenth century the papacy had mutated into a major participant in that society. The church’s property claims were an increasingly important part of its institutional life. Ending lay investiture could have had the effect of divesting clergy from their entanglement in secular property structures. The opposite happened. Their involvement grew. Rather than representing an alternative to feudal lords, bishops and popes now competed with kings and princes for bigger slices of the same pie. Popes, in particular, were always eager to claim territories for the church and insist that kings only “borrowed”

those lands as fiefs. Such efforts did not go unchallenged. When, for example, Pope Hadrian IV wrote a letter to his rival, Emperor Frederick II, in 1157, and suggested ambiguously that the Emperor's rule may be a feudal "benefit" bestowed by the pope—essentially making the emperor the pope's vassal—it caused an international scandal that moved even bishops to protest.

As popes positioned themselves as competitors in the feudal system, they made a number of serious miscalculations. For one thing, they failed to recognize in time the emergence of an entirely new type of political rival: the nation-state. They had no compelling answer to the absolutist agendas advanced by monarchs of those states. They also misjudged the kings themselves. This became evident when Boniface VIII sought to prevent King Phillip the Fair of France from taxing the French clergy in the years before and after 1300. When Boniface challenged Phillip's sovereignty and threatened the king with excommunication, Phillip responded by freezing exports of French gold to Rome. Boniface was stunned. The pope depended heavily on French revenues, and now had no choice but to give in—exposing the vulnerability of the popes' worldliness. Phillip was able to tax "his" French clergy. Several years later, Boniface tried again to assert his authority over the king. Issuing the bull *Unam sanctam* (1302), which presented the medieval era's farthest-reaching assertion of a pope's lordship over earthly powers, Boniface planted a flag deep into the sovereignty-claims of the French monarch. For good measure, the pope closed the bull with a statement that went far beyond even *Dictatus Papae* in its efforts to define a Roman church: "Therefore we declare, state, define and pronounce that it is altogether necessary for salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff." (Tierney, 1988: 189].

Boniface underestimated the king. Phillip and his entourage were a new type of political animal: cynical and ruthless, they were unimpressed by excommunication. They also had little patience for notions of a "Roman" church. With a few swift strokes, the French king turned the tables on the pope. Phillip accused Boniface of heresy and of criminal conduct. He then sent an army of mercenaries to capture the pope. Boniface

managed to escape but died a few weeks later. This was a turning point in papal history, equal in significance to Gregory VII's conflict with Henry IV two centuries earlier. For the foreseeable future, popes would be French and reside not in Rome, but in Avignon, close to the French king. Romanist critics came to call this the "Babylonian Captivity" of the church. Whatever its name, it was worlds away from the *libertas ecclesiae* envisioned by Leo IX and Gregory VII.

The claims asserted by documents such as *Dictatus Papae* or, more extremely, by *Unam Sanctam*, proved unworkable. Instead of creating a church "free" of worldly influence, they led to an even more worldly church. By the fourteenth century, the papacy had politicized itself beyond recognition. Efforts to define the church exclusively as a "Roman," or even as a "papal" institution, had run aground. The reasons for this are complex, but they have to do, at least in part, with a loss of vision. Arguably, papal apologists had spent so much time trying to define their church that they had, along the way, lost their focus on Christianity.

### *The Mendicant Critique of Wealth and Property*

To many Christians, the worldliness of popes and their clergy stood in crass contradiction to the example of Jesus Christ. Would Jesus have built himself a palace and donned a tiara? The clergy's investment in feudal society further cost them credibility. Even people who knew no alternative recognized that feudal relations were strongly exploitative. Initially, the servants of the church offered a kind of refuge from that world. There are accounts of persons pressured by local lords to give up their inherited lands in exchange for "protection," but resisting those mafia-like tactics and instead bequeathing the property to a local abbey. The abbey represented something more charitable; in their eyes it was governed by Christian values rather than a desire for profit. By and by, those impressions changed. Even abbeys became so attached to their property that their Christian image slid behind a more venal and ruthless façade. By the time of the Reformation, abbots were among the most loathed of the peasants' enemies. Again,

many people looked at the church and asked: is this what Jesus would do?

Increasing numbers of Christians thought not. They sought a life that was in closer harmony with Christ's example and teachings. The four centuries between 1100 and the Reformation saw repeated attempts by both clergy and laypeople to establish alternatives to a property-owning church. Not surprisingly, church leaders sought to suppress them. Still, many prevailed for a time and formed a vital Christian counterculture, testing not only the patience of popes and bishops, but also their conscience.

During this same period, medieval economic life changed fundamentally. The eleventh century brought relief, at long last, from the waves of outside invaders—Vikings from the North, Hungarians from the East, and Muslims from the South—who had terrorized the continent and pillaged its communities in the centuries before. As some historians have remarked, Europeans were now safe to plunder each other. They took advantage of this opportunity by creating economies based on money and market exchange. In what has been called a "Commercial Revolution," profit supplanted survival as a primary economic goal. Two important demographic factors were connected to this change in economic direction: an overall increase in population density, and the growth of cities. Cities are particularly interesting because they were home to a new social class that did not fit into the traditional categories of feudal society. Craftsmen and merchants were neither lords nor peasants. To the aristocracy's chagrin, money made them self-confident, and they not only defied subjugation, they insisted on a share of governance. In time, they got it. In time, too, they amassed more wealth than the nobles, and it was the rising bourgeoisie and its bankers who made dependents of princes and bishops.

The new profit economy did not replace feudalism's agrarian economy any more than the city replaced the countryside; it emerged alongside and modified it. Feudal relations continued, but they were now augmented by the mechanisms of trade. Whereas previous ages might have seen surplus produce distributed in an act of largesse, it now would likely be sold, and the money saved. Church institutions engaged in both forms of



economy—largely without self-reflection or criticism of the principles involved.

This began at the level of religious behavior. The central feudal relationship, that of lord to vassal, was sealed by a religious rite that made free use of Christian idioms. In such rites of “homage,” the vassal knelt before the lord, placed his clasped hands inside those of his future master, and swore an oath of fealty, most often using visual aids such as Scripture or relics to emphasize his sincerity. Even more overtly Christian were the rites of investiture that followed. Witnesses to such performances must have felt the allusive similarities to Holy Communion: here, too, recipients knelt before a superior and received benefits from a “lord.” There was a grammatical similarity between the two ceremonies as well: in both cases, the recipient was expected to keep up his own end of the bargain—to go forth and serve the lord. Against such a background, the mass itself could be read as a spiritualized enactment of feudal subjugation. Such ambiguities in religious practice help explain why so many critics of the institutional church, from the twelfth-century Humiliati to the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, rejected the swearing of oaths and sought radical revisions of the mass and eucharistic practice.

The church used feudal economic structures directly, as well. The most obvious example is that of the *benefice*. Closely synonymous with “fief,” a benefice is property given by a lord to a vassal in exchange for service. The church made use of that arrangement to pay its clergy. Bishops or ecclesial patrons granted benefices to priests so that the latter might have a source of income. That income typically came from peasants who rented the property. On the surface, the practice made financial sense for the institution. At the same time, though, it contained a number of problems. The least of these, from the perceptions of those involved, was the vassal-like relationship of the priest to his ecclesial superior; people who served the medieval church were used to such hierarchies. Somewhat more troubling was the lord-like relationship of the priest to “his” peasants, particularly since these people were also his parishioners. It complicated his pastoral role, identified him with the ruling class, and cemented his outsider’s status. Even more problematic were the abuses that such arrangements invited.

Many benefices were obtained (often purchased) by wealthy people who had no intention at all of serving the corresponding parish but were simply interested in its income. In fact, many were not clergy. They “sublet” the property to a vicar and paid him a small part of the proceeds. That subverted oversight and church discipline, and encouraged absenteeism, a common scourge of medieval church life.

One could name many more examples of medieval church economy. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that, during the period in question, churches acquired a great deal of property and wealth. In addition to their involvement in feudal practices, they received goods and money through trade, from “souvenirs” of the Crusades, from fees exacted in exchange for spiritual services, and from an extensive system of taxes. Individual parish priests may not have been well off, but many of their superiors certainly were.

Critics took issue with those developments and the new mentality that they engendered. In a move that recalls the influx of a Celtic monastic ethos during the early stages of Christianization, these critics espoused a deeply ascetic spirituality. Its hallmark (though by no means its only feature) was a rejection of property. Its proponents took vows of poverty.

Attempts to introduce a more ascetic attitude toward clerical property were already part of the Gregorian reform effort. At a synod in 1059, Hildebrand (later Pope Gregory VII) and his colleague Peter Damian issued harsh rebukes against cathedral canons who lived “like laypeople.” In their view, canons (groups of priests who were attached to specific cathedrals or other churches) should live an “apostolic common life,” cloistered within the church’s premises, eating and praying together, and separate from the town’s laypeople. Many canons had instead taken up residence in their own houses, living like lords and aristocrats. Not only were they unavailable for much of the church’s desired common life, but—and this was a centerpiece of the reformers’ criticism—they were amassing private possessions. Owning private property was considered un-apostolic. Renouncing it therefore became a key part of reforming the canons’ lifestyle. Though they encountered considerable resistance, the Gregorian reformers did succeed in

launching a partial overhaul of the system by establishing the “Rule of Augustine,” a rigorous, ascetic regulation of the common life, for canons. Though only a minority adopted the Augustinian rule, it established a significant alternative to the prevailing clerical culture of the time and reveals a lot about the kind of Christianity that Gregory and his supporters sought to create.

As the tepid response to these reform measures indicates, most representatives of the institutional church were not enthusiastic about criticizing the principles of property ownership. One sees this in the development of theological and legal theory as well. Early authors held up the biblical ideal of common ownership, based on passages such as Acts 2: 44–45, which describe how members of the apostolic community “had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods and distributed the proceeds to all, according to need.” As medieval economies came to develop entirely different values, and most Christians behaved in a manner diametrically opposed to the apostolic example, theologians began to adjust their theories. By the twelfth century, prominent legal scholars such as Rufinus the Canonist (1150–c. 1191) maintained that, while having possessions was not in and of itself a part of natural law, the corruption of human behavior required that such provisions be added. People needed to be able to define what is “mine” in order to protect such things from the avaricious hands of their neighbors who lacked respect for common ownership. A century later, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was already arguing that private property was, indeed, safeguarded by natural law. This fit nicely the acquisitive mood of the era’s elites and became their preferred theological position.

As the Gregorian spirit of reform waned, popes and bishops not only lost interest in changing the church’s relation to property, they began to persecute reformers who did. Arnold of Brescia (c. 1100–1155) was one such reformer. As head of a community of canons, Arnold took a particularly rigorous stance against ecclesial materialism. In his view, any clergyman who owned property would not be saved. If that statement was straightforward, so was the papacy’s response: Arnold was thrown out of office, expelled from Italy, and later hanged. Prominent theologians such as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), abbot and a leader of the

immensely wealthy Cistercian order, saw in Arnold an “enemy of the Lord.”

Some of the most meaningful alternatives to a property-owning church came from laypeople. Christian men and women, often living in urban settings and troubled by the effect of commercial culture on religious values, organized spiritual communities dedicated to a purer, more apostolic life. One such group called itself “Humiliati,” or “Humble Ones.” Emerging in northern Italy during the 1100s, the Humiliati adopted simple clothing, rejected oaths, and shared their possessions while living in a community. Seeking to spread their faith, they also preached in public. That combination of alternative communal living and public preaching (by laypeople) incurred the suspicion of successive popes. Pope Lucius III condemned the Humiliati as heretical in 1184. That changed under the more sympathetic papacy of Innocent III, who recognized the Humiliati as an official order and even gave their lay members permission to preach. Within a century, the Humiliati had attracted so many members that they needed nearly 400 convents in northern and central Italy to house them.

Somewhat less fortunate was a similar group of Christian laypeople who originated at roughly the same time in Lyons, France. Organized by a wealthy merchant named Waldes (?–c. 1218), who had sold his possessions, the Waldensians espoused many of the same apostolic values as the Humiliati. Their rejection of property was more rigorous, however, and the French Waldensians had no convents. Instead, they traveled about, wearing coarse garments and often going barefoot, to preach to a broader public. Their message was based on following the example of Christ and the apostles, whose stories they told with the help of Gospels translated into the vernacular. Their rapid spread throughout and beyond France to Italy and Germany incited the same hostility that greeted the Humiliati. While some of the Waldensians were reinstated by Innocent III, most were persecuted. Many of those who survived withdrew into underground communities away from episcopal control. As a result, their existence remained precarious and continually threatened, but their church lives on to the present day.

The same cannot be said of the Cathars, still another group dedicated to a life of Christian purity. Little is known about the movement, in part because most of the source-material was written by its enemies, and also because it was eradicated so completely. Congregating in southern France during the late 1100s, the Cathars, sometimes called “Albigensians,” also sought to restore the ascetic spirit and practices of the early church. They, too, rejected oaths and private property. Some of them apparently taught a dualistic theology with Manichean overtones. The true church, in their view, consisted of pure Christians dedicated to lives of holiness. It was not the church of Rome, which in fact persecuted true Christians. Consequently, the Cathars rejected Rome’s authority and established religious rites of their own, including rigorous catechesis followed by a kind of “spirit baptism” (*consolamentum*) that supplemented the water baptism received at birth. None of this endeared them to the dominant church authorities, of course, and the Cathars were quickly branded heretical. After several unsuccessful attempts to re-convert them or to suppress them with inquisitions, Pope Innocent III authorized a crusade to exterminate the Cathars in 1208. Because the pope promised to give the Cathars’ lands to anyone who killed them, there was no shortage of volunteers. Thousands of Cathars were massacred along with thousands of normal Catholics who happened to live near them—and whose land was attractive to the mercenaries. While a handful of Cathars survived to face the Inquisition, the movement was crushed.

The ideals of apostolic poverty could not be suppressed entirely, however. In fact, the age of Humiliati, Waldensians, Cathars, and similar movements also produced two religious orders who overcame initial suspicions and established themselves as durable voices within the institutional church: Franciscans and Dominicans. The Franciscans had a lot in common with the other movements. Their founder, Francis of Assisi (c. 1182–1226), owed his considerable wealth to the emergent cloth industry, much like Waldes of Lyons. Like Waldes, too, Francis, a layperson, experienced a dramatic conversion that caused him to renounce wealth and property and to embrace a life of evangelical poverty and humility. Assembling a small community of “brothers,” Francis drafted a simple rule and in 1210 sought its papal approval. Innocent III, who was better

than most popes at recognizing a need to integrate such voices if possible, rather than suppress them indiscriminately, welcomed Francis' proposal. A new order was born. Having secured papal endorsement, the Order of Friars Minor launched a missionary movement that spread over Europe within a decade.

The Dominicans were an indirect product of the Cathars. They were founded by Dominic de Guzman (c. 1170–1221), a Spanish priest dispatched by Innocent III to convert the Cathars. While Dominic's successes in this regard were modest, the "heretics" made a profound impression on him. Combining ideals of apostolic poverty with a powerful commitment to preaching, Dominic laid the groundwork for a new order, based on the *Rule of Augustine*, and approved by the pope in 1216. Though their views on property were less radical than those of the Franciscans, the enormous subsequent success of the Dominicans further underscores the widespread yearning for a Christianity patterned on a more primitive apostolic example. Clearly, these mendicant orders had struck a nerve.

Such developments of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries recall a basic tension between Western Christianity's institutional and political demands, on the one side, and its spiritual needs, on the other. While that dynamic had been present in the West in one form or another from the beginnings of post-imperial Christianization, it now developed a specific focal point: the role of wealth and property. It is no accident that a deep suspicion of wealth and property arose as a counterpoint to the political rise of the papacy. It gained strength as popes abandoned the Gregorian reform-ethos. Soon, even those advocates of apostolic poverty who had been approved by Rome found themselves in conflict with the papacy.

In 1323, Pope John XXII, residing in the papal palace of Avignon, defined as heresy the assertion that Christ and his apostles owned no property. Anyone who claimed that Christ and his apostles owned no property would henceforth be subject to excommunication. This was a hard blow to the mendicant ethos. It was also a direct hit on the more rigorous members of the Franciscans, who were now forced to modify their ideals of poverty. Those who resisted—among them the theologian and philosopher William of Ockham (c. 1285–1347)—were declared heretical and excluded from the pope's church. That church, it was clear, would tolerate

no critique of its financial practices. To hammer home his point, John XXII “gave” the Franciscans all the church properties that they had up to now only borrowed. The Franciscans could no longer say they owned nothing.

Deeper cultural shifts in the economic life of late-medieval Europe posed an additional challenge to the mendicant ethos. This is most evident in urban centers. As cities developed new market-based economies, they also cultivated a distinctive ideal of citizenship. It involved owning property. Those citizens who owned houses and means of production—those who had *invested* financially in the city—were considered better citizens. Correspondingly, men of means and property rose to the front ranks of those cities and became “pillars of the community,” as one says today. This opened the door to a much more positive assessment of worldly possessions in general. Beautiful objects, not only those found in nature, but, more importantly, those that were crafted by artisans and sold as commodities, acquired cultural value. Desiring and owning such objects was thought ethically acceptable, and those who did so saw themselves as “life-affirming.”

In such contexts, the older ascetic ideals of the mendicant tradition had no place. They were dismissed as old-fashioned or even as socially dangerous. Only a few of the mendicant friars resisted these shifts. Most accommodated themselves to the new spirit and made compromises with its property-based ethos. The few who did not were ridiculed and marginalized. Others retreated to the countryside, where their ministry had more resonance. In the cities and among the educated elite, anti-fraternalism, hostility toward mendicants in general and Franciscans in particular, became a prominent feature of Renaissance society. Theirs was not a message anyone wished to hear.

## *Conclusion*

The preceding text has lifted up several narrative strands from a grand and convoluted medieval tapestry. Obviously, one could say much more. But these strands were not selected at random. They were chosen to illustrate and explain some of the important

issues facing Western Christianity on the eve of the Reformation. Most importantly, Christianity in Western Europe found itself in a long-term mission setting. Even if the Christian religion had reached the last corners of the continent by 1500, “Christianization,” the process by which religious and cultural behavior became regulated by Christian norms, was far from complete. Arguably, it never is. From a historian’s perspective, though, it is important to note that most Christian leaders were aware of this need and sought consciously to advance the progress of Christianization. It was a driving force of their vocations.

Even as most medieval leaders agreed that Christianization needed to go on, they disagreed on how that should happen. Several of these disagreements are important because they shaped the way medieval history played itself out and because their lack of resolution set the stage for the sixteenth century’s Reformation.

One of the most basic unresolved issues concerned the definition of “church.” Two perspectives were prominent in this debate. At times they were complementary, at others, they were at odds. The first concerned Christianity’s need to organize its people, to make tangible the notion that Christians comprised “one body.” There were a variety of approaches to that challenge. One drew on notions of sacral kingship, arguing that, in a Christian kingdom, the religious and political bodies were one and the same, and best governed by a king. As time went on, an alternative vision gained traction. It was based on a sharp distinction between spiritual and temporal spheres, and argued for a priority of the spiritual, governed by a priestly, or “clerical” class. By the eleventh century, its defining feature became centralized hierarchical organization with the Roman pope as head. After a brief period of dominance, the papal model succumbed to schism. Its failures helped inspire a third model, advanced during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, that sought to supplant (or in some views augment) the pope’s authority with that of a broadly representative council of Christian laypeople and clergy. At the year 1500, all three of these options remained in contention and none had achieved a durable victory.

A second perspective focused on the church not as institution, but as a group of people seeking to live Christian lives. Its guiding principles were spiritual and ethical. It was more concerned with



holiness than with hierarchy. Much of its inspiration came from monastic sources. It hardly ever came from Rome. The dynamic was often guided by “restorationist” tendencies, a desire to restore the ethos and practices of the apostolic age. It almost always had an ascetic bent. In later years it contained a rigorous critique of wealth and property. At times, this endeavor seemed to take place on a different plane from that on which royalist, papalist and conciliarist elites argued their respective ideologies. Occasionally, as with the eleventh-century papal reform movement, the elites themselves took up its cause, but generally they resisted or sought to control impulses of this kind. Tellingly, the term “heresy” was applied far more often to people who seemed to try *too hard* to be Christian than to those who rejected the religion.

Attempts of leading clergy to control and define the Christian religion remained superficial. Christianity expanded, but seldom according to anyone’s plan. It grew by a mix of popular practices, local traditions, compelling individual examples, and the formative power of Christian rituals and narratives. Under the influence of the mendicants, teaching and preaching became powerful instruments of Christianization during the later Middle Ages, but theology’s impact was limited by the overwhelming lack of literacy that characterized the period and by the lack of formal education for clergy. Priests were supposed to be able to read, but that was no guarantee that any of them ever did. Consequently, the great minds that emerged from the Franciscan and Dominican orders—men such as Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Duns Scotus—exerted only an indirect influence on the religiosity of common people. Its impact remains poorly understood. Efforts to exert more direct control, such as the Fourth Lateran Council’s mandates on annual confession and communion, generally fell short of expectations. Even the clergy themselves paid little attention to continual injunctions against concubinage or simony. None of this should suggest that the medieval church was irredeemably “corrupt,” as is often maintained. It is simply meant to underscore how disorganized the church remained. Good intentions and sound Christian principles were certainly present, but they proved difficult to implement. Had one of the competing institutional models been more successful, things may have been different.

But they were not. At 1500, Christianity remained only superficially “united,” and “the church” was still a work in progress.

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