12.11: Church Reform in the Eleventh Century

By the eleventh century, Europe suffered from frequent violence and the Church itself was in a sorry state: Pope John XII, for example, the man who had crowned Otto I, was so infamous for his immorality that it was said that under his rule the papal palace (called the Lateran) was little better than a brothel. From the mid-eleventh century, both popes and other clergymen would seek to reform both the institutional structures of the Church and Christian society as a whole.

The Holy Roman Emperor Henry III (r. 1039 – 1056) set the reforming papacy into motion. In 1049, he had traveled to Rome to be crowned emperor. When he arrived in the city, he found three men claiming to be pope, each supported by a family of Roman nobles. The outraged emperor deposed all three and replaced them with his own candidate, Pope Leo IX (r. 1049 – 1054). Leo IX would usher in a period in which reformers dominated the papacy.

These popes believed that to reform the Church, they would need to do so as its unquestioned leaders and that the institutional Church should be independent from control of laypeople. The position of pope had long been a prestigious one: Peter, the chief of Jesus Christ’s disciples had, according to the Christian tradition, been the first bishop of Rome, the city in which he had been killed. Eleventh-century popes increasingly argued that since Peter had been the chief of Jesus’s followers (and thus the first pope), the whole Church owed the popes the obedience that the disciples had owed Peter, who himself had been given his authority by Christ.

Such a position was in many ways revolutionary. In the Byzantine Empire, the emperors often directed the affairs of the Church (although such attempts frequently went badly wrong as with the Iconoclasm Controversy). Western European kings appointed bishops, and the Holy Roman Emperors believed that they had the right to both appoint and depose popes. To claim the Church was independent of lay control went against centuries of practice.

Moreover, not all churchmen recognized the absolute authority of the pope. The pope was one of five churchmen traditionally known as patriarchs, the highest ranking bishops of the Church.
The pope was the patriarch of Rome; the other four were the patriarchs of Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. With Jerusalem and Alexandria (and often Antioch) under Muslim rule, the patriarch of Constantinople was the most prestigious of the Eastern Orthodox patriarchs, dwelling in a city that was Rome’s successor. The patriarchs of Constantinople believed that the Roman pope had a place of honor because Peter had resided in Rome, but they did not believe he had any authority over other patriarchs.

12.11.1: The Filioque Controversy and the Split between Rome and Constantinople

This difference of opinion as to the authority of the pope would eventually break out in conflict. The church following the pope (which we will refer to as the Catholic Church for the sake of convenience), had a creed in its liturgy that said that God the Holy Spirit proceeds both from God the Father and from God the Son. The Eastern Orthodox version of this creed spoke of God the Holy Spirit as proceeding only from God the Father. Representatives of both churches quarreled over this wording, with the popes attempting to order the Orthodox Churches to state that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son in their creed. We thus call this controversy the Filioque Controversy, since Latin for “and from the Son” is filioque.

On 16 July 1054, Humbert of Silva Candida, the pope’s legate (i.e., ambassador) together with his entourage stormed into the Hagia Sophia as the patriarch was celebrating Communion and hurled a parchment scroll onto the altar; the scroll decreed the patriarch to be excommunicated. In response, the patriarch excommunicated the pope. Catholic and Orthodox churches were now split.

12.11.2: Simony and the Investiture Controversy

In spite of the schism between Catholic and Orthodox Churches, the popes turned to reforming the Church in the Catholic west. Two pressing concerns of the popes were the elimination of simony, the buying and selling of Church offices, and the protection of the Church’s independence from laypeople. The fight of the reforming popes to assert the Church’s independence led to the Investiture Controversy, the conflict between the popes and Holy Roman Emperors (and other kings of Western Europe) over who had the right to appoint churchmen.

To understand the Investiture Controversy, we need to understand the nature of a medieval bishop’s power and authority. A bishop in medieval Europe was a Church leader, with a cathedral church and a palace. A medieval bishop would also hold lands with fiefs on these lands (and military obligations from those who held these fiefs), just like any great noble.

The Holy Roman Emperors believed that they had the right to appoint bishops both because a bishop held lands from the emperor and because the emperors believed themselves to be the leaders of all Christendom. The reforming popes of the eleventh century, particularly Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073 – 1085), objected to this belief. These popes believed that, since their authority as popes came from God, their spiritual authority was superior to the earthly authority of any king or prince. They further claimed their right to be independent rulers of the Papal States in Central Italy, based on the Donation of Constantine (see Chapter Seven).

Gregory VII was up against a man just as strong willed as he in the person of Emperor Henry IV (r. 1056 – 1106). From
1075, their relationship became increasingly adversarial as each claimed the exclusive right to appoint and depose bishops. Eventually, this conflict burst into open flame when Henry claimed that Gregory was in fact not rightfully pope at all and attempted to appoint his own pope. In response, Gregory proclaimed that none of Henry’s subjects had a duty to obey him and encouraged his subjects to rise in rebellion.

Without the Church to legitimate Henry IV, his empire collapsed into civil war. As a result, Henry took a small band of followers and, in the dead of winter, crossed the Alps, braving the snowy, ice-covered passes to negotiate with the pope in person. In January, he approached the mountain castle of Canossa where the pope was staying and begged Gregory for forgiveness, waiting outside of the pope’s castle on his knees in the snow for three days. Finally, Pope Gregory
forgave the emperor.

In the end, though, after a public ceremony of reconciliation, Henry returned to Central Europe, crushed the rebellion, and then returned to Italy with an army, forcing Gregory VII into exile. This Investiture Controversy would drag on for another four decades. In the end, the Holy Roman Emperors and popes would reach a compromise with the 1122 Concordat of Worms. The compromise was that clergy would choose bishops, but that the emperor could decide disputed elections. A bishop would receive his lands from the emperor in one ceremony, and the emblems of his spiritual authority from the pope in another. Other kings of Western Europe reached similar compromises with the papacy.

The results of half a century of papal reform efforts were mixed. The Catholic and Orthodox Churches had split with one another, and tensions remain between the two to this day. Although the popes failed to achieve everything they sought, they did gain limited independence of the Church, and they succeeded almost completely in ending the practice of simony. Indeed, one contrast between Western Europe and much of the rest of the world is a strong sense of separation between secular and sacred authority. That separation of Church and state owes much to the troubled years of the Investiture Controversy.

The successes of the papacy in their efforts at Church reform, together with the military successes seen by Christians in the Western Mediterranean against Muslims, would inspire the popes to an even more ambitious effort: the Crusades.